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A New Test of Issue Ownership Theory: U.S. Senate Campaign Debates

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Proper APA citation for this article is:

A New Test of Issue Ownership Theory: U.S. Senate Campaign Debates

John C. Davis

This study tests issue ownership theory on U.S. Senate debates. Issue ownership theory states that each of the two major American parties possess issues which the public perceive to be best handled by one party over another. Republicans are thought to be better at handling problems concerning national defense, foreign policy, and taxes. Democrats are believed to be better at addressing issues such as education, health care, and the environment. This study hypothesizes that, due to unique characteristics regarding the office being sought, U.S. Senate candidates from both major parties do not adhere to previously recognized patterns of issue ownership and more frequently discuss Democratic issues over Republican issues. The results of content analytic programming provided supporting evidence for this hypothesis. Based on this analysis, the extent to which issue ownership applies to debates is dependent upon the position being sought.

Keywords: Issue Ownership Theory; U.S. Senate, Political Party; Campaign

This study applies issue ownership theory to U.S. Senate campaign debates. While issue ownership enjoys a rich literature in varying contexts, including campaign debates, previous scholarship has paid little attention to the application of this theory below the presidential level, in general, and U.S. Senate campaign debates, in particular. Despite the lack of research on the topic, scholarship examining public opinion polling and the effects of issue ownership on Senate campaign television spots suggests the roles of legislative office—being more domestically-focused than an executive role in government—encourage the discussion of Democratic issues over Republican issues, regardless of a candidate’s party. Campaign debates between those seeking election or re-election to the United States Senate—an office with a statewide constituency—provide unique opportunities to test the boundaries of applying issue ownership theory to political debates.

Debates are significant campaign events. In addition to the public paying a notable amount of attention to debates (Patterson, 2002), these contests pit competing candidates against one another face-to-face (Chaffee, 1979); allow for the public to listen and assess the candidates’ views on issues for an extended period, and, at times, these encounters influence voters (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). Another notable characteristic of debates is their ability to capture the attention of the “marginally attentive” (Pfau, 2003) or those among the public who otherwise would not seek out information regarding races or candidates. These members of the electorate
are also called “peripheral voters” (Kaufmann, Petrocik, & Shaw, 2008) because they are most affected by short-term political events.

The existing political debate literature on lower-ticket races (for the purposes of this paper “lower-ticket” refers to any campaign other than presidential) is lacking. Perhaps due to the prestige of the office, the relative ease by which data are acquired, or its national constituency, the bulk of political debate scholarship in the United States focuses on presidential campaigns. It is important that scholars not neglect lower-ticket debates in the literature as these contests allow for a theory’s generalizability to be measured. Lower-ticket campaign debates have enjoyed a significant increase in frequency since the 1970s (Trent, Friedenberg, & Denton Jr., 2011) offering scholars opportunities to examine existing theories—based on empirical study on presidential campaign debates—in the contexts of state and local contests. As debate scholarship continues to grow in size and scope (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), it is necessary that lower-ticket debates—such as U.S. Senate campaign debates—are more thoroughly examined. Scholarship focusing on non-presidential debates expands our knowledge of existing debate theory in varying environments. After reviewing issue ownership and its development in debate literature, issue ownership theory will applied to Senatorial campaign debates.

**Issue Ownership Theory**

Issue ownership theory posits that major party candidates frame issues in such a way that, over time, voters perceive one of the two parties to be better suited at handling a particular issue than the other party (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrock, 1996). The party’s superior competence over the rival party is largely determined by an individual’s party preference (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2014) and whether or not the particular issue in is perceived, by the person, as a priority of for the respective party in question (Egan, 2013).

Issue ownership has been articulated as multidimensional—consisting of a competence dimension and an associative dimension (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). The more developed component of this multidimensional concept found in the literature—competency—has received considerable scholarly attention. Specifically, issue ownership has been applied to explain, in part, voter behavior at the individual level (Green & Hobolt, 2008; Meyer & Muller, 2013; Stubager & Slothuus, 2013), the strategic interplay between campaign advertising and media coverage of political candidates (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994; Hays 2008; Van der Brug & Berkhout, 2015), through the lenses of different party systems (Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998; Van der Brug, 2004; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009; Greys, 2012) and presidential campaign debates (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik & Benoit, 2003; Petroick, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003/2004). More recently, research has begun investigating issue ownership in social media networks (Guo & Vargo, 2015).

In the contemporary American context, the notion of issue ownership leads to Democratic candidates’ campaigns emphasizing issues such as education, healthcare, and job...
creation while Republicans address taxes, national defense, foreign relations, and cutting the
deficit. This emphasis is due to the partisan candidates’ interests in increasing the saliency of the
issues in which their respective party “owns.” Petrocik wrote that, “a candidate’s campaign can
be understood as a ‘marketing’ effort: The goal is to achieve a strategic advantage by making
problems which reflect owned issues…the criteria by which voters make their choice” (p. 828).
While voters’ policy stances remain rather stable over time (Page & Shapiro, 1992), national
events (recession, war, etc.) can shift issue priorities and advantage one party over another.
Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003/2004) found empirical evidence to support the presence of
issue ownership in presidential campaigning.

While advertisements and other candidate-directed messaging are controlled by the
campaign, debates are unscripted and present office seekers with the challenge of staying on
message while also complying with debate parameters. Developing and maintaining a consistent
theme throughout a debate can be challenging to debaters facing unscripted questions from
moderators or members of the audience. As Trent and Friedenberg (2000) wrote, “As the debate
progresses, candidates must constantly respond to specific questions on the issue of the day.
While those issues vary from campaign to campaign, most successful political debaters have
been able to integrate the specific issues into an overall framework” (p.268). Regarding issue
ownership, specifically, Petrocik provided an example of how the theory plays a role in
candidates’ attempts to stay on message with their debate responses:

A Republican asked about his plans to deal with urban unemployment might stress the
importance of stimulating business opportunities through investment credits and less
regulations; a Democrat asked about how to reduce crime might talk about investments
in education and training programs that provide employable skills. Candidates respond
thus both because they are likely to be consistent with their personal beliefs and because
to do otherwise would advantage their opponent (Petrocik, 1996, p. 829).

In other words, candidates focus their attention on those issues that their respective party is
perceived to be strongest.

While this theory has not been applied to U.S. Senate debates, issue ownership has been
applied to presidential debates. Increasing the sample size from a previous study on issue
selection and campaign advertising (Benoit & Hansen, 2002), Benoit and Hansen (2004) found
evidence to support the existence of issue ownership in that candidates more frequently discuss
their own party’s issues over their opponent’s. In addition, these authors found that presidential
candidates (of both parties) discussed Republican issues during debates more than Democratic
issues. The study concluded that this may be because “Republican-owned” issues are closer
aligned to the unique powers and duties of the President.

Petrocik (1996) recognized that a party’s ownership, while quite stable, can change over
time. However, the relative stability with regard to public perception of issue ownership results
in a party being unable to “steal” another party’s issues, according to Tresch, Lefevere, and
Walgrave (2013). Nonetheless, Benoit and Hansen’s (2004) study of issue ownership and
presidential debates suggests the context of the position being sought may also play a role in the strength of issue ownership.

While presidential candidates aspire to have a national constituency, senators are only held accountable by a state-wide electorate. Does this variation change the way issue ownership plays out in Senate campaign debates? Until this paper, no known study of this nature has been done. However, Benoit and Airne (2005) did lend credence to the idea that issue ownership’s level of existence may vary with the political office being sought. Their study examined the extent of issue ownership in non-presidential television spots. The authors concluded:

Local ads and US Senate spots from 2002 did not follow issue ownership predictions (candidates did not discuss their own party’s issues significantly more than the other party’s issues.) Unlike presidential spots, non-presidential advertising discusses Democratic issues more than Republican ones; the Republican Party owns more national or federal issues such as national and foreign policy (p. 493).

Following up on Benoit and Airne’s (2005) work, Brazeal and Benoit (2008) expanded their sample size of Senate television spots to find that, while Democrats favored Democratic issues and Republicans favored Republican issues, the results were statistically insignificant. Thus, the study finds that issue ownership in Senate campaign television spots is much weaker than that found in previous studies at the presidential campaign level. Much like the earlier study by Benoit and Airne (2005), the Brazeal and Benoit (2008) study suggested the domestic focuses of day to day legislative activities and constituency concerns of a senator lead to more Democratic discussion. This contrasts the findings of Benoit and Hansen (2004) that stated that the presidential office seems to favor Republican issues.

While issue ownership is well-established in both political party and presidential debate literatures, U.S. Senate campaign debates provide an untested arena for issue ownership. Benoit and Airne (2005) and Brazeal and Benoit (2008) provided evidence that senate campaigns operate differently from presidential campaigns in terms of issue ownership. It has been suggested that this difference is due, in part, to the different constituencies and duties of the offices. Kauffman (2004) extended this line of thought by examining public opinion data for 1988 U.S. Senate races and proposing that some candidates may be equipped to capitalize on issues typically “owned” by their opponent’s party.

This study will offer a test of issue ownership in U.S. Senate debates to determine if the distinctions in controlled messaging (advertisements and television spots) for presidential and Senate candidates exist in U.S. Senate campaign debates or if the differences in constituency and responsibility provide context for violation of the theory.

Methodology
This study examines the extent to which issue ownership theory applies to U.S. Senate debates. Existing debate literature focuses on presidential debates and provides strong evidence to suggest candidates promote the issues their respective parties “own” in order to increase salience of those issues and therefore gain an electoral advantage. While no known study has examined this relationship at the Senate campaign debate level, previous scholarship on U.S. Senate television advertisements have provided mixed or weak evidence to support issue ownership. To provide a possible explanation for these mixed findings, I subscribe to the conclusions of Benoit and Airne (2005), and Brazeal and Benoit (2008). The constituencies, powers and responsibilities of the Presidency and Senate each favor one of the two major parties more than the other (President-Republican and Senate-Democratic) and suggest that Senate campaign debates may deviate from issue ownership theory.

The first of two hypotheses suggests confirmation of Benoit and Airne’s (2005) and Brazeal and Benoit’s (2008) earlier results concerning U.S. Senate campaign advertisements, and extends their findings to Senate campaign debates.

H1. In U.S. Senate debates, Democratic candidates and Republican candidates discuss a larger proportion of Democratic issues.

The second hypothesis predicts a non-significant relationship and runs counter to existing debate literature on issue ownership suggesting candidates discuss issues their respective parties “own.” A predicted null finding would show that issue ownership (as it has been explained at the presidential campaign debate level) does not apply. This hypothesis, instead, argues that issue ownership is subject to the position being sought.

H2. In U.S. Senate debates, Democratic candidates and Republican candidates will not discuss their respective party’s “owned” issues significantly more than that of the other party’s “owned” issues.

In order to test these two hypotheses, I use Concordance content analytic computer software to count the frequencies in which candidates discuss issues of their own party or of their opponents’. Benoit and Hansen (2004) stated that there are two reasons for using computer content analysis to test for issue ownership in debates: “it allows analysis of a large body of texts and it assures reliability” (p. 147). This investigation required that I obtain debate transcripts from senatorial debates. Another advantage to using Concordance is that the software not only provides the frequency in which an issue is discussed but also provides the context. The ability to ensure each issue is being introduced in a manner consistent with issue ownership theory is a valuable capability of the software program. By considering the context in which a word or phrase is introduced, the researcher can evaluate whether the candidates are exploiting their respective parties’ “owned” issues or if they are responding to an opponent or the moderator.
Petrocik (1996) provided 35 issues that can be identified as being “owned” by one of the two major parties. Benoit and Hansen (2004) analyzed 5 Democratic issues (education, healthcare, environment, jobs, and poverty) and 5 Republican issues (national defense, foreign policy, federal spending/deficit, taxation, and abortion). For the sake of consistency, I adopt these same ten issues for coding purposes.

Table 1 provides information regarding the four debates analyzed. Of the debates in the sample, one debate (Akin-McCaskill) took place before the 2012 general election while the remaining three occurred before the 2010 mid-terms. While three of the four debates featured the two candidates together, one (Boxer-Fiorina) took place with one candidate in the state of the contested race (Fiorina) and the other in Washington D.C. (Boxer). Of the four debates, one aired on a Public Broadcasting System affiliate (Angle-Reid), one on CNN (Coons-O’Donnell), one on a National Public Radio affiliate (Boxer-Fiorina). The 2012 Akin-McCaskill debate was the second of two. None of the debates in the sample feature third party candidate participation. In all four cases, transcripts were “cleaned” by removing moderator statements and questions.

These debates were chosen for the study for three reasons. First, variation was sought in the sample with regard to incumbency. Senators McCaskill, Reid, and Boxer were seeking reelection to the U.S. Senate while the contest between Coons and O’Donnell was an open seat competition. Additionally, despite the fact that the three incumbents are all Democrats, these incumbents are relatively diverse in their ideological placement—relative to their Democratic colleagues in the Senate. Ideological placement is determined by employing dynamic, weighted, nominal three-step estimation (DW-NOMINATE) scores that place congressional members in an ideological spectrum (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Poole & Rosenthal, 2007). DW-NOMINATE scores reflect legislators’ voting behavior on contemporary “liberal” and “conservative” issues (voteview.com). Of the three Democratic incumbent U.S. Senators in the sample, Boxer was the most liberal (10th most liberal in the 111th Congress), Reid was second (28th most liberal in the 111th Congress), and McCaskill was the third (49th most liberal in the 111th Congress; 42nd in the 112th Congress). In 2012, McCaskill was considered by many to be a centrist candidate in her reelection bid. Spialek and Munz (2014) observed that in her debates against U.S. Representative Todd Akin, she “…constructed a centrist issue agenda consisting of Republican, Democratic, and uniquely centrist issues” (p. 29).
In addition to these cases providing variation with regard to incumbency status and ideological placement, these four races were highly publicized by regional and national media outlets. It stands to reason that, if anything, the media attention these four races—and the debates as consequence—garnered would produce environments more conducive to supporting issue ownership theory as it has been portrayed in presidential races. The national coverage of these races probably enhanced the likelihood that Democratic and Republican candidates alike would seek to emphasize the issues that voters identify as their respective parties’ stronger issues at the national level. The political environments surrounding these debates provide more rigorous tests of my hypotheses.

The debate transcripts were broken down by the party member response (all Republicans were separated from their Democratic opponents) and moderator statements and questions are removed in order to isolate the responses of the candidates. The content analysis program produces a count for each word stated in the debates. Context is also important when coding issues. In their study, Benoit and Hansen (2004) noted that Concordance allowed them to, “check the context of the terms “drug” and “drugs” so we count uses of “prescription drugs” in health care but not instances of “drug abuse” (p. 147). Similarly, this investigation considered the context of the words spoken. The 2010 and 2012 election cycles followed the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—a controversial policy supported by President Obama and large majorities of Democrats in the U.S. House and Senate. There can be no doubt the ACA was a recurring theme—and potential complicating factor—in all congressional campaign debates since 2010 to today. Fortunately, the content analytic software allows the user to read the line of text in which each word appears to ensure proper coding. For instance, the word “worker” appears four times among Democratic candidate responses. The context of the word each time dealt with immigration policy, but without investigating the matter further, I might have concluded that the word was a Democratic coded issue—“jobs.”

Following computer content analysis, the data were recoded into two dichotomous variables. The dependent variable, the issues discussed, was coded as either Democratic or Republican. The independent variable, party of the candidate, was coded the same way. The Democratic issues were summed together as were the Republican issues. Due to the nominal nature of the data collected and coded, a chi-square test was utilized to test the hypotheses.

Results
Table 2 presents the results of this study on issue ownership in U.S. Senate campaign debates. The findings derived from four highly-publicized U.S. Senate campaign debates from the 2010 and 2012 election cycles support both of the proposed hypotheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues Discussed</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>417 (55%)</td>
<td>340 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p = .133</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>305 (51%)</td>
<td>294 (49%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 1359</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: p-value indicates high level of doubt in rejecting null hypothesis at α = .05

Overall, a majority of the issues raised by the U.S. Senate candidates have been previously evaluated to be “owned” by Democrats (education, health care, environment, jobs, and poverty). Among Democratic candidates, 55% of the issues discussed were Democratic “owned” ones. Among Republican candidates, 51% of issues discussed were Democratic “owned” issues. Consequently, Republican issues were discussed 45% of the time by Democrats and 49% of the time by Republicans.

In addition, the model’s chi-squared coefficient is below the critical level for significance resulting in a p-value of .133 (above the conventional α .05). This provides further support for what the proportions suggest: issue ownership (office-seekers disproportionately discussing the issues their party is perceived to be more competent in handling in order to raise saliency and gain electoral advantages) does not apply to U.S. Senate debates. More specifically, these results suggest candidates for the U.S. Senate may debate issues more closely associated with the Democratic Party.

**Discussion**

This study tests the extent to which issue ownership theory applies to U.S. Senate debates. Previous investigations into the role of issue ownership—albeit, in presidential debates—have found evidence to support the theory in a variety of contexts (Benoit & Hansen, 2002; Benoit & Hansen, 2004). However, the results of this study—U.S. Senate candidates emphasize issues in campaign debates previously thought to be “owned” by the Democratic
New Test of Issue Ownership Theory

Party—lend support for scholarship on the role of issue ownership in non-presidential television spots. Until this study, no investigation has been done to test the theory on U.S. Senate campaign debates, specifically.

Previous scholarship reported that presidential candidates, while discussing most frequently their own party’s issues, tended to favor Republican issues (Benoit & Hansen, 2004). This is said to be due to the role of the office being sought—as the position inherently favors Republican “owned” issues. Likewise, given the powers, duties, and—perhaps most importantly—statewide constituencies of senators, it makes sense that Democratic and Republican candidates for the U.S. Senate favor issues perceived by the public to be best handled by Democrats (education, health care, environment, jobs, and poverty). Mayhew (1974) emphasized the desires of elected officers to maintain their offices by gaining re-election. Given this, it is rational for U.S. Senatorial candidates’ debates to emphasize domestic issues—as they are commonly the immediate concerns of citizens—often directly affecting members of the voting public.

It could be argued that what is captured by this study are short-term effects and that the addition of more debates from different election cycles might reveal contradictory findings—as election cycles seem to have their own unique issues and concerns. While a higher number of cases—spread out over a greater number of election cycles—might satisfy a methodological critique of this nature, the concern regarding short-term effects is mitigated by the pre-existing issue-ownership literature that acknowledged short-term effects and noted of their limited ability to significantly alter results (Petrocik, 1996).

The findings in this paper are intended to enrich issue ownership theory and stimulate scholarly discussion of the theory’s application in varying contexts. Based on the findings of this investigation, it is reasonable to assume that the degree to which candidates engage in issue ownership in political debates is subject to the position being sought. Candidates competing for a seat in the U.S. Senate seek positions with different powers, responsibilities, and constituencies than those who seek the Presidency. Thus, candidates for the United States Senate—regardless of their party identification—emphasize their knowledge of and experience with domestic concerns, which previous scholarship suggests are “owned” by the Democratic Party, by and large. The conclusion of this study is not that a party seeks to claim ownership of an issue previously thought to be owned by another. Given the relative stability of voter perceptions of issue ownership, candidates who attempt such a maneuver are likely to fail—as Tresch, Lefevere, and Walgrove (2013) suggested. Rather, this study suggests that exceptions exist with regard to the office being sought. In addition to providing a unique test of issue ownership, the findings from this study emphasize the role of context and nuance when considering the application of such a theory.

As another general election cycle approaches, this study aims to shed light on the importance of context when studying political debates through the lens of issue ownership. As stated earlier, issue ownership is quite stable over time. However, those seeking office are fully
aware of the constituency in which each aspires to serve—altering the ways in which issue ownership is implemented by candidates. The literature suggests we can be fairly confident that the 2016 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates will each seek to emphasize the issues which their respective party is perceived to be most competent in handling. Based on the findings in this paper, observers can also expect upcoming campaign debates for seats in the U.S. Senate to, on average, discuss issues thought more often to be “owned” by Democrats. However, in addition to the type of office being sought, there are likely other factors involved in determining the extent to which issue ownership is exercised in a campaign debate. For example, existing research does not yet shed light on whether or not the sex of the debate competitors impacts the way that issue ownership is exercised—a potentially important topic in 2016 as the current favorite for the Democratic presidential nominee is female—Hillary Clinton. Petrocik (1996) wrote, “…personal characteristics can convey ownership of an issue: gender can determine who is the more reliable candidate on matters of sex discrimination, a retired war hero is a particularly credible commentator on military security” (p.847). The findings reported in this paper might encourage future scholarship on the role of candidates’ genders and backgrounds, as this avenue holds promise as a fruitful path for future scholarship. Additionally, future research could expand and improve upon the collective understanding of issue ownership theory—as it relates to campaign debates. The relatively little attention paid to issue ownership and U.S. Senate campaign debates is still greater than that which is spent considering the theories’ application to state and local campaign debates. Finally, campaign debates for non-partisan elected positions provide avenues for research with regard to the use of Democratic and Republican “owned” issues.

References


“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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Benefits of Collegiate Forensic Participation

“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
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 Louden (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**
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).

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.”

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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.
Benefits of Collegiate Forensic Participation

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Benefits of Collegiate Forensic Participation

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Alumni Challenge

An Inductive Approach to Communication Analysis

Thomas Duke
William Carey University Alumni (2007-2011)

Thomas Duke

Thomas Duke is a Ph.D. candidate and Teaching Assistant at the University of Alabama. His dissertation focuses on methods of teaching rhetorical readiness. His scholarly work falls into three categories: speech pedagogy, the history of rhetoric, and rhetorical theory. He was first introduced to forensics by Jennifer Talbert at William Carey University.

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An Inductive Approach to Communication Analysis

Thomas Duke
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**ALUMNI CHALLENGE:** Forensic alumni can be a tremendous to individual programs and the activity as a whole. While we commonly ask alums to judge at tournaments or maybe even speak at a year-end banquet they don’t get many opportunities to address the entire forensics community. Through our “Alumni Challenges” Speaker & Gavel offers our alumni an opportunity to speak to the forensic community. We encourage them to challenge us to re-examine, re-envision, and possibly re-invent the way we operate as a community.

**Keywords:** forensics, Communication Analysis, Rhetorical Criticism, alumni challenge

Forensics can be a perilous place to break with molds and traditions. Not least among the perils of forensics are the numerous little norms that, if violated, mark one as a newbie or not a competitor from the better sort of program. I recall that one of these was the unwritten rule not to take notes in individual events. I always broke this rule, especially in Communication Analysis (hereinafter CA), because I felt I could not learn from (or size up) my fellow competitors if I did not make notes about their speech. Unfortunately, the deeply conservative mood that legitimates such “unwritten rules and performance practices” also affects our understanding of the events themselves (Kelly, Paine, Richardson & White, 2010, p. 38). For instance, to alter the form of an event, unless one comes from a nationally competitive program, indicates that one does not understand the practices of the forensics tribe.

As I recall, in CA this sometimes took the form of condemning persons who used generic models, such as Burke’s pentad. I cannot actually recall, even from the worst forensics tournaments, a competitor who did not even have a model. But I am sure if there had been such a competitor, they would have quickly learned of their mistake from a ballot. The model is so deeply integrated into CA, that I think we have forgotten that the beginning of any CA is not the model but the artifact. After all, what competitor ever found their CA topic by rummaging through a journal until they found a good model to apply? But from listening to CAs, as I did frequently, you might get the impression that the reliance on a model in CA places certain limits on the intellectual development of competitors through the event. So, as a challenge to the community, I want to briefly discuss the limits imposed by the model-based structure in CA, attempt an explanation of their origins and propose an alternative way of doing CA that would improve the event.
A Constraining Structure

In form, the CA that I wrote my sophomore year was identical (e.g. in how it approached the event) to the CA that I wrote my senior year. In terms of the intellectual work required, there was not that much to challenge me when writing the speech. Like some other forensics events, CA lacks tiering. That is to say, the event remains essentially the same from the day you enter your first tournament with your first speech until you perform for your final time at nationals your senior year. This is particularly a problem with the platform speeches, though it may also impact the other events.

Aside from the possibility of some students getting bored and quitting the event or even forensics, there is also a pedagogical problem. That problem is that upon mastering the event as it is commonly done, students inevitably plateau. I am not suggesting that there are no benefits to performing in the third and fourth years, but that the benefits diminish the further one goes with an event. This is even more so the case with CA. Because unlike the other platform speeches, the form of a CA is absolutely rigid. In the other platform speeches, one can choose to approach the speech using different patterns, but there are no similar options in CA. The rigid structure has become our way of inventing the speech—not unlike the trend in nineteenth-century rhetoric to substitute arrangement for invention (Rowan, 1995).

While I do not want to argue for the abolition of the current structure—model, application, implications— I do want to suggest that there are other structures that more advanced students can adopt. The most limiting factor with the current structure is its reliance on the model. In the current structure, the model guides most of the analysis and is privileged (at least in comparison to the artifact). Of course, the model exists because students new to the art of rhetorical criticism (as embodied in CA) need a set of ideas to help them analyze an artifact. In that sense, it serves a very valuable purpose. But for students who have already learned about some communication theories and their associated terms, the model limits the development of their analytic creativity.

While one might be able to find a model to fit every artifact in existence, at some point, one should move beyond the need for models and learn to analyze the artifact on one’s own terms. (After all, this is how rhetoricians generate models in the first place). In any case, the ability to look at a communication artifact and understand how it functions is more fundamental than the ability to apply a list of criteria to the artifact. And ultimately, CA should be a vehicle for making students into citizen-professionals who can make critical judgments and theorize about artifacts for themselves. But the current structure places a ceiling on the development of students, making them an immobile intellectual underclass within the communication discipline. In order to empower students as budding rhetorical critics, I think we ought to consider an alternative approach to the current CA structure that is widely used. In the next section, I will briefly sketch the origins of the
model-based approach to analysis and argue for its alternative, the artifact-based approach.

**Origins of the Model**

The history of rhetorical criticism as a disciplinary practice dates back to the 1920s, when Wichelns first described an approach to criticizing speeches that involved applying a heavily condensed version of Aristotle’s rhetoric to speech artifacts (1925). Wichelns spawned a school of critics who would become known as the neo-Aristotelians (Bryant, 1958). Eventually, the neo-Aristotelians were roundly excoriated for relying too extensively on their oversimplified version of Aristotle as an approach to analysis. Black wrote of their approach that it was “seriously compromised as a critical system” because it required the critic “to yield to the judgment of…[the] theories [that] guide him” (1965, p. 56).

Instead of a single pseudo-Aristotelian model, the new critics simply used models derived from a diversity of sources (e.g. Foucault and Burke). From the rejection of the Aristotelian model, the contemporary approach to rhetorical criticism was born. In its nativity, that approach involved the use of ideological models to critique artifacts and so deconstruct the oppressive social systems that created them (Wander, 1983; McKerrow, 1989). This approach still dominates the journals today (Medhurst, 2015). Though the new critics replaced the old and more models were admitted as authoritative, ultimately, as Leff puts it, little changed except “a substitution of new moulds for old ones” (1985, p. 378). And Black’s criticism of the neo-Aristotelians remained applicable to the new critics—their judgment was constrained by their use of models.

Reliance on models is all too common in academic rhetorical criticism (and communication theory) and so in turn it is pervasive in the event created to mirror that academic practice. But an alternative exists to the model-based approach to rhetorical criticism. In rhetorical scholarship, it is a marginal practice. The chief proponent of this view, Leff, argues that criticism should focus on “the rhetorical action embodied in particular discourses” and not on “theoretical constructions” (1985, p. 378). In other words, the artifact ought to be at the center of a rhetorical criticism, not the model.

**A New Mold for Communication Analysis**

As an alternative to the model-based or deductive approach to CA, I want to propose an inductive, artifact-centered approach to the event. Instead of following the traditional structure, an inductive CA would have: a description of the artifact, a research question, an analysis of the artifact and an implications section. The challenge in the first section is for students to correctly identify salient features of the artifact to describe. The purpose is to identify those features of the artifact that are relevant to the analysis undertaken in the second point of the speech.
In the analysis section, there are two objectives. The analysis should 1) establish certain generalizations about the rhetorical function(s) of the artifact and 2) offer some proof that these generalizations are valid. If a student were, for instance, analyzing the ever-popular visual artifact, the analysis section would be an appropriate place to identify the rhetorical elements used by the artifact (such as visual metaphor or visual irony). Of course, an analysis is not limited to identifying rhetorical figures at work. One might also connect the artifact to a wider genre through comparison to other artifacts or highlight how the artifact constructs a view of its audience (constitutive rhetorical criticism). But none of these forms of analysis will be as rigorous as their counterparts in academic rhetorical criticism. Other approaches could include a biographical treatment of the author (a neo-Aristotelian form of criticism).

The analysis section is the most substantially different portion, in that it allows the student to analyze the artifact without a list of criteria to look for provided by the model. This is not to say that the student will analyze without using any theory—just that no one theory or model will guide the analysis. Instead, the analysis will be driven by those elements of the artifact that make it worth investigating. Common terms and ideas such as ‘visual ideograph’ or ‘constitutive rhetoric’ may still be employed, but only insofar as they reveal something about the artifact. But instead of relying on the connections suggested by a model or theory, the student would be required to generate such connections on their own and offer some kind of evidence to substantiate them.

The last point of the speech, the implications, does not differ all that much. But instead of identifying rhetorical elements, this section should use the rhetorical elements identified to generate broader conclusions. For instance, the implications section is the place to point out that a visual metaphor identified in the second point actually constructs harmful power relationships between the viewer and the creator of a visual artifact etc.

**Conclusion**

I do not propose the artifact-centered, inductive approach to CA as a complete replacement for the model-based, deductive approach. I think the two can co-exist in the same space, fulfilling different functions. There are certainly cases when the artifact analyzed is a very good example of a particular rhetorical theory or when the competitor wants to explore the implications of a rhetorical model. In such cases, it is more appropriate to follow the current CA format. But these uses will not account for all cases. By accepting an inductive approach to doing CA, the community will open up opportunities for competitors in CA to develop an even more nuanced understanding of the art of rhetorical criticism. So in a way, my proposal for an inductive approach to CA challenges the community to make the event more intellectually challenging and rewarding for competitors.
References


Alumni Corner

Nate Dendy: What Forensics Did For Me
Truman State University Forensic Alumni (2001-2003)

Nate Dendy

Nate is a professional actor, magician, and magic consultant. He competed for Truman State University from 2001-2003 in all Interp events, ADS, and impromptu (once), but his favorites events were Prose and Duo. His most memorable tournament was the “Blood Bath by the Beach Tournament” at Point Loma. He finaled all his events and took the Individual Pent Award both days. Over the course of two years, Nate earned six state championship titles, several Individual Pent Awards, and over 250 trophies to his name. He has been completely humble about it, until now.

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Nate Dendy: What Forensics Did for Me
Nate Dendy
Professional Actor and Magician
New York City, New York

ALUMNI CORNER: The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program’s very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni’s stories.

Keywords: forensics, benefits of forensics, Alumni Corner

“If it was easy, we’d call it football.”

I was seventeen years old when I joined Truman State University’s Forensics program. I walked in naive to the process; flying by the seat of my pants, coasting on talent and instinct, where dinner per diem was guaranteed, and if you played your cards right, big shiny trophies were the dessert. Two years later, I walked away with habits and words that serve me to this day. You see, I’m a professional actor and magician. What I thought would be a fun activity to feed my seventeen year old ego, turned out to be the very thing that started me on a path to success. Out of dozens of lessons learned during my time doing speech and debate, three things have allowed me to survive and flourish in my chosen profession: consistency, stamina, and insight.

In Steve Martin’s book Born Standing Up he talks about how easy it is to be great, but really hard to be good; he is talking about consistency. Anyone can have a moment of brilliance, but to be able to deliver something good every single time takes a lot of work. In forensics you learn, very quickly, that consistency is what wins. The performance you give in a final round late at night for 50 people has to be the same as the one you gave at 7:30 that morning to just one person. My coach had a mantra that we would all chant in unison before we began each tournament; “Every round, letter perfect, by the numbers, just like in practice.” It turns out, that expression became my work ethic.

A typical theatre contract consists of a four-week rehearsal period, with eight shows a week for maybe five weeks. Theaters simply cannot afford inconsistency. Every audience is a paying one. They expect to see a show that feels vibrant, fresh, and as if it has never happened before and will never happen again. As an actor I must be able to deliver a consistent product every single time, it must be...well, letter perfect, by the numbers, just like in rehearsals.
My most recent project was playing Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. This particular production had a great deal of magic in it. With magic there is no gray area: It’s black or it’s white. It works or it doesn’t work. It fools you or it doesn’t. The only way to become great at it is to be consistent. I am expected to deliver a fully developed performance, make sure my lines are heard clearly, hit the same marks every night, and make sure the magic works every time. The kind of focus and consistency required in major theatrical productions isn’t something that is pulled from the air. It has to be developed, and competing in Forensics gave me that tool.

Another skill you quickly develop on a forensics team is stamina. My teammates and I took full course loads, practiced until 2:00 am, attended tournaments, and usually got back just in time to shower and head back to classes. The hectic schedule forced me to develop personal stamina and time management skills most college students lack. I learned to work efficiently and be more productive than my non-forensics peers. That helped me in my M.F.A. program at Brown University and in every theatre production I have worked. I am usually working on two or three projects in addition to running eight shows a week. I can’t afford to waste time or get tired.

Finally, perhaps the most valuable thing I got from my time in forensics is insight. My coach would always ask me, “Nate, what greater insight into the human condition does this story give us?” An eloquent way of asking, “Why should I care?” Yes, theatre majors read a lot of plays. Eventually they develop a Zen like understanding of literature. However, imagine what you get when you read 25 short stories, hundreds of poems, and dozens of plays each year just to be ready for the first tournament. Then imagine spending 10 hours a day, 20+ weekends a year listening to some of the most talented performers in the country perform literature. I must have spent at least 100 hours on the practice and performance of each of my pieces. That experience gives you an insight into literature that is unparalleled by anything you find in a classroom. That same insight is the base of any theatrical performance. It has also helped me in auditions. I can quickly understand what is at the heart of a scene or monologue. This allows me to make richer choices as a character in auditions as well as on stage. That is a direct result of what I learned about literature and character development in forensics.

I can’t imagine what it would have been like had I not joined my forensics team in college. Nor can I imagine what I would be like as a professional in the theatre had it not been for what was instilled on me during those years on the team. I’m currently in the process of writing, creating, and performing in my own stage show. It is, without a doubt, the most complex and challenging thing I have ever attempted in my life. Whenever I get scared or lost and think quitting is a real option, I think back on my two years on the forensics team. We all achieved some pretty impossible things. Whenever I hit a wall and thought I couldn’t push past it, my coach would look at me and say “Nate, if it was easy, we’d call it football.” We don’t call it football, we call it forensics. It's a way of life, really.
Toni Dach: What Forensics did for Me


Toni Dach
Toni is a SAS Software Specialist in the Enforcement & Compliance division of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Before becoming a code nerd, she was a Senior International Trade Compliance Analyst with the same agency, and trotted the globe protecting U.S. industry from unfair trade. She competed for Ohio University from 1999-2003. Her favorite event was and still is extemporaneous speaking, since you're allowed to nerd out in that event. Her favorite moment was when a judge finally recognized and rewarded her brilliance in using economic theory to explain legislative initiatives in Extemp. She realizes most of you are nodding off at the thought of those "exciting moments."

Because Toni is a government employee it is important to note that "All views expressed in this article are those of Toni Dach's and do not reflect those of her employer."

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Washington, DC

**ALUMNI CORNER:** The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program’s very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni’s stories.

**Keywords:** forensics, benefits of forensics, Alumni Corner

It’s 10:05 AM on a Tuesday. I’m standing near the front of a computer training classroom looking over my coworkers who have come for a technology training session. While their computers boot up, I guess at what is going happen in this 90-minute session, the 10th of 22 training sessions I will lead in just eight weeks’ time. I see the chatty long-time friends who have situated themselves together near the front of the classroom, eager to chat about their weekend. I see the shy but sharp “mechanic” who has grabbed a computer in the middle of the room and will both help those around him and ask good questions. I see the “new guy” trying to prove he’s sharp and attentive. And I see the coworker who doesn’t really “get” our technology coming to the training for the second time and trying to hide in the back corner of the room.

As their computers boot up, I introduce myself and my assistant, a fellow SAS software specialist. Everyone in the room has met us before. While their ancient computers continue to boot, I try to make the training interesting by offering candy to anyone who can give me a good reason why we’re moving to server-based SAS. I get all four of the answers I have on my PowerPoint slide, and I hand out the requisite candy bars.

This all seems boring, but, for a moment, consider what it means to be in front of that classroom. While the training became more interesting once those computers booted up, I was tasked with making both the wait for the computers to start up and the training interesting and useful. How, exactly, does someone become comfortable leading training or presenting to a dozen or more of their peers or superiors? For me, forensics gave me the skills to present as confidently as I do.
When I first tried out for the speech team in high school, at a school with a highly competitive team, I tried out for Lincoln-Douglas debate. That audition had me saying that I’d rather my mom die in a car crash exercising her right to not wear a seatbelt than allow government intervention in private choices. Oops. I won the debate but lost the war, and the speech coach thought I would probably do better in extemp, foreign because I had an interest in international affairs. And I LOVED extemp. I did it for 3 years in high school and 4 years in college, and I’d do it again if you asked me nicely. Please, ask me to pontificate on an academic topic with 30 minutes to prepare with reliable sources at my disposal.

Over those seven years, I came to love other events, as well. Rhetorical criticism/communication analysis is still a favorite because of the thought, research, and analysis it requires. I love a good persuasive speech that compels me to think about the facts of something and take action on it. I’ve even had amazing interpretation rounds where I tell my professional friends, who never competed in forensics in any form but came to judge on my invitation and fell in love with the activity quickly, that I could barely decide who was the best, worst, and middle in a round of stars.

All of this seems romantic, but it comes full circle to that classroom just a few months ago. I am trusted to lead training sessions and present to just about anyone because I have the public speaking background I cultivated in those seven years of high school and college competition.

When I started my job at the Department of Commerce, I met with my boss’s boss on my second or third day, to welcome me. He told me that he had Googled me, and he was especially impressed that I had been on Ohio University’s Forensics team. While there were some doubts when it came time to present to the Assistant Secretary for Enforcement and Compliance, International Trade Administration, but I was eventually given the opportunity and was able to present without a hitch. When that presentation finally happened, my boss and his boss asked me “how I did it” when the meeting ended, and I said it was no big deal to talk for 15 minutes on a topic I had been studying and writing about for the last six months. “This isn’t the biggest audience I’ve ever spoken to,” I said. I admitted that the drink of water I took was when I lost my place but they said they didn’t notice my pause.

After several years as an analyst, a position on the SAS team became available, and my superiors knew I was the right person for the job. Yes, I was nominated because I demonstrated skill in SAS programming, but a big part of the nomination was because I could communicate complex technology concepts to my coworkers and gain their trust because of my interpersonal communication skills.

It’s been three years since I joined the SAS team, and the communication skills I gained competing in forensics in high school and college have never failed me. I can lead a training of
10-20 peers, help a coworker better understand our basic programming, explain complex and unique programming in “lay” terms, and even lobby our leadership for funding for the technology we need to complete our mission. I truly believe I would not have the confidence, poise, research skills, or presentation skills to do everything I’ve done in the last decade if I didn’t participate in forensics.

Communicating clearly and confidently is important, no matter your major or career path. The only official communication class I took in college was INCO 101, introduction to public speaking. Forensics made this economics and international trade specialist turned technology specialist a confident and competent communicator. The skills forensics teach and enforce are valuable no matter your career path. Just ask anyone from an international trade compliance analyst to the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Enforcement and Compliance.