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## Fueling the Competition: Exploring Individual Events Competitors' Nutritional Choices

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# Fueling the Competition: Exploring Individual Events Competitors' Nutritional Choices



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Kerber

# Fueling the Competition: Exploring Individual Events Competitors' Nutritional Choices

Page | 7

Anne E. Kerber

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*Despite ongoing scholarly conversations surrounding the health of forensic competitors and educators, there remains a dearth of published research demonstrating the impact of efforts to improve the activity's wellness environment. Additionally, the dialogue has primarily focused on educators' perspectives, obscuring how students' participation in forensics influences their health behaviors as well as how they experience initiatives to improve wellness. This study aims to address the literature gaps, using the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory to analyze how forensic competitors account for their nutritional judgments during tournaments. Competition emerged as a logical force that not only guides students' nutritional choices, but also provides them with a mechanism for imposing coherence on actions that do not follow stated norms.*

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*Key Words: Forensics, wellness, nutrition, competitive speech and debate, Coordinated Management of Meaning*

The overall wellness of forensic competitors and coaches has been an ongoing concern for more than two decades. Hatfield, Hatfield, and Carver (1989) initially raised the issue in an essay for the First Developmental Conference for Individual Events, highlighting how tournament management could foster a wellness perspective in forensics. Hatfield (2004) recalled, "As anyone familiar with the paper and its response knows, the paper was widely discussed, not to mention wildly lampooned (e.g., as 'the banana bread paper')" (p. 24). Despite ridicule, Hatfield et al.'s manuscript prompted other forensic educators to begin investigating health and wellness issues within the activity. Published research has illuminated a diverse range of concerns surrounding the tournament setting (e.g., length of the competitive forensic season, and physical demands of travel).

Several scholars have asserted the tournament atmosphere often constrains participants' healthful choices. Often stretching from early morning until evenings with few breaks, tournament schedules have been blamed for students' and coaches' lack of sleep; extensive caffeine, alcohol and/or nicotine consumption; and, reliance on sugar and other fast foods (Dickmeyer, 2002;

## Fueling Forensics

Leland, 2004; Olson, 2004a; Schnoor, 2004; Trejo, 2004; Williams, 2003). The consumption of food has been historically noted as a source of concern for students. Tournament schedules and stress have been identified as issues that make it particularly difficult for students to eat meals during competitions, and can lead to overconsumption during evening meals (see Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Paine & Stanley, 2003).

Additionally, researchers have pointed to the length of the competitive forensic season and travel demands as other health and wellness concerns. The individual events season lasts nearly eight months, which Billings (2002) observed is “longer than the college football and basketball seasons *combined* [emphasis in the original]” (p. 33). The thrill of competition erodes for many students and coaches, particularly when the length of the season is coupled with extensive travel to attend tournaments. Multiple studies have identified the health impacts of competition as being among the top perceived drawbacks of forensics participation among current and former competitors (Billings, 2011; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Paine & Stanley, 2003; Quenette, Larson-Casselton, & Littlefield, 2007; Williams, 2003; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001). Respondents in these studies raised specific concerns surrounding stress, fatigue and sleep deprivation, and the use of tobacco, alcohol or other substances as wellness issues related to forensics participation. Moreover, Billings’ 2011 survey of former competitors found respondents who competed at the American Forensics Association (AFA) National Individual Events Tournament were less likely to regard forensics competition as healthy, likely due to the “more rigorous qualification system for participation” and increased travel requirements (p. 121).

Students are not the only stakeholders expressing concerns about the forensics wellness environment. Dickmeyer (2002) candidly summed up issues from a coach’s perspective:

Individual events coaches are at their “unhealthiest” when traveling and participating in tournaments. Coaches eat poorly, have no time to exercise, overindulge on caffeine (perhaps nicotine and alcohol as well), get little sleep, and when exhausted from the weekend, put their life (as well as their students’ lives) in jeopardy when hitting the road for the long drive home. It seems absolutely ridiculous and morally irresponsible that individual events coaches put themselves and their students in danger so often (p. 58).

Likewise, others have explored the connections between competition travel with health and wellness issues for coaches (Leland, 2004; Olson, 2004a). Richardson (2005) similarly connected the increase in research on forensic coaching burnout and competition-related stressors to the “preponderance of swing tournaments, longer seasons, and more taxing tournament schedules” (p. 110). Although literature in this area underscores the physical tolls of forensics participation, the evidence suggests it influences mental health as well. For instance, Carmack and Holm (2013) found emotional exhaustion was a major element of perceived burnout among forensic educators, particularly those who have considered leaving the activity.

Fortunately, the attention directed to forensics activities and health has sparked promising changes. The *National Forensic Journal* (NFJ) published a special wellness-themed issue in 2004

Kerber

highlighting examples of wellness initiatives at local and national tournaments, such as healthier food options provided for students and coaches, and adjustments to competition schedules to provide for meal-time breaks (Schnoor, 2004; Trejo, 2004). The NFJ issue also outlined AFA's newly established wellness policy (Workman, 2004); and identified other opportunities for wellness-related changes in tournament and program management (Leland, 2004; Olson 2004a; Olson 2004b; Trejo, 2004). More recently, a resolution of the 2010 National Developmental Conference on Individual Events indicated the emphasis on well-being has created "many productive changes for the student population" (Cronn-Mills & Schnoor, 2010, p. 140).

Page | 9

Yet, two primary concerns remain about the state of the dialogue on forensics and health. First, there is a dearth of published research demonstrating the impact of efforts to improve the wellness environment in forensics. The majority of scholarship on the activity's health impacts is more than a decade old, and little health related-research appears to be in the pipeline: Between 1998 and 2007, only 10 papers presented at the National Communication's annual convention addressed forensics and wellness (Cronn-Mills & Croucher, 2013). One recent exception, Carmack's (2016) study of forensic educators' sensemaking regarding healthy tournament management practices, indicates progress has been made: Although just over half of the participants were *aware* of the AFA's wellness policies, 67 percent reported *implementing* healthy tournament procedures. Because previous research may not accurately reflect how travel patterns and tournament practices have evolved over time (see related arguments by Williams et al., 2001), ongoing assessment of health behaviors in forensics is warranted. Moreover, applied research is needed to help forensic educators grapple with shared practical tensions surrounding the time and resources necessary to enact wellness practices (Carmack, 2016).

Second, the existing dialogue on wellness issues in forensics has foregrounded educators' perspectives. Studies that have incorporated students' voices were not explicitly designed to address their perspectives on health behaviors. Rather, health concerns emerged in the research as a response to current and former competitors' perceptions of other issues related to forensic participation, such as travel and the overall benefits and drawbacks of the activity (Billings, 2011; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Paine & Stanley, 2003; Quenette et al., 2007; Williams, 2003; Williams et al., 2001). Without scholarship explicitly focused on students' health concerns, considerable ambiguity exists surrounding how to interpret and address forensic competitors' wellness needs. A case in point: Littlefield and Sellnow's study indicated that up to three-quarters of students alter their health behaviors during tournaments. However, it is unclear whether (and/or to what degree) students would engage in (un)healthy practices if they were not participating in forensics (see also Williams et al., 2001). Moreover, as Carmack (2016) noted, it remains to be seen how students are responding to the wellness practices implemented at tournaments. Conducting research on students' health practices during forensics competitions can also help to address Schnoor's (2004) questions surrounding the ambiguity of wellness, and particularly how it ought to be defined and addressed at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

## Fueling Forensics

My study is intended to provide a starting point for scholarship bridging these gaps in wellness-related forensics research. Given the breadth of potential student health concerns raised by other scholars discussed earlier in this essay, I begin by focusing on one specific wellness issue:

*“Exploring how students account for their nutritional judgments in the tournament context represents an initial step toward identifying and understanding health behaviors and assessing organizational wellness changes.”*

The nutritional choices made by individual events competitors during tournaments. Not only has food been identified as a student health concern in existing research, it has also been a focus for forensics wellness efforts (Carmack, 2016; Olson, 2004b; Schnoor, 2004; Trejo, 2004). Exploring how students account for their nutritional judgments in the tournament context represents an initial step toward identifying and understanding health behaviors and assessing organizational wellness changes.

Page | 10

### Theoretical Framework

The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory offers a robust theoretical framework for understanding how individual events competitors negotiate the messages influencing their nutritional choices. CMM emphasizes how communication is the primary social process through which meaning is constructed, and informs action (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982; Pearce & Pearce, 2000). First, CMM posits that *meaning* is developed recursively through the movement between individuals' communicative acts and salient frameworks of understanding (Pearce & Pearce, 2000; Rose, 2006). Engaging in dialogue requires proactive and reactive conversational moves described as *coordination*: Individuals in conversation strive to impose coherence upon their own meanings and actions, while simultaneously making sense of others' meanings in ways that are mutually understandable (Littlejohn, 2009; Pearce & Pearce, 2000). However, as Rose (2006) noted, CMM theory does not presume “individuals need to make the same coherent sense of an episode for it to be coordinated” (p. 180). In other words, even when coordination occurs, the interpretation of meaning can be complex, contextually bound, and fluid.

According to CMM theory, individuals draw upon personal experience for interpreting the meanings and actions shared in dialogue with others (Littlejohn, 2009). However, all experiences are nested within multiple contexts (e.g., familial, sociocultural, organizational). Individuals thus must negotiate which frameworks of understanding are most salient for making sense of a specific communicative act. Additionally, the social discourses that provide resources for making sense of meanings are themselves sites of struggle over meaning and power (Lupton, 2004). CMM theory provides resources for analyzing message interpretation, including a typology for various levels of understanding ranging from message content to broader discursive forms, such as life scripts and archetypes (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). More recent articulations of CMM theory have also explored how individuals use storytelling to “create contexts, establish meanings, and define actions” (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 202) in ways that illustrate logics of meaning and action

*Kerber*

(see related arguments by Rose, 2006).

CMM theory also enables researchers to unpack how individuals manage, or contextually (re)construct messages to impose a sense of coherence upon desired actions (Pearce & Pearce, 2000). Specifically, the theory articulates two kinds of rules: Regulative rules guide individuals' actions and behaviors. Constitutive rules enable individuals to interpret others' communicative acts (Bruss et al., 2005; Cronen et al., 1982). CMM theory does note that rules are continually evolving, which allows for multiple interpretive possibilities (Arnett, 2013; Bruss et al., 2005; Pearce & Cronen, 1980). Moreover, CMM posits that communicative actions occur within fields of deontic logic that operate as a "felt force," connecting action to regulative rules (Pearce & Pearce, 2000; Rose, 2006). For example, Bruss et al. (2005) found that sociocultural and familial discourses shaped how caregivers negotiated the meanings of public health messages about childhood obesity prevention. Specifically, they observed how culture became a logical force that undermined the extent to which participants complied with governmental dietary recommendations. Individuals experience logical forces as moral positions that enable or constrain how they believe they ought to behave. For instance, a forensic competitor may follow a particular diet outside of the activity as the result of familial, governmental, or sociocultural discourses. Yet, they may act differently in the forensic tournament context as the result of "felt forces" embedded in messages from peers and educators. For the purpose of this study, I analyzed how individual events competitors imposed coherence upon their nutritional judgments within the tournament environment. I particularly focused on participants' accounts of their actions, as well as how these accounts highlighted regulative rules, the source(s) of messages underpinning these rules, and perceived logical forces influencing their actions.

### **Method**

This study is based on respondent interviews with 15 individual events competitors who volunteered to discuss their nutritional choices at forensic tournaments. The following paragraphs describe (a) the methods used to recruit participants, (b) the participants' characteristics, and (c) procedures for data collection and analysis.

### **Participants**

Prior to beginning the study, I received institutional review board approval. During the initial phase of data collection, I recruited participants by sending emails to forensic coaches in the Midwest asking them to share information about the study with their teams. My initial recruitment yielded eight volunteers. During the second phase of data collection, a recruitment message was submitted to the individual events list-serv (IEL). Through this approach, I recruited another seven volunteers, for a total of 15 participants. It was during the second phase of interviews that I noticed respondents' answers had become repetitive, and fit within recurrent themes. The observation indicated I had reached a point of "theoretical saturation" that enabled me to make robust and viable knowledge claims (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 224). Between the two phases, I interviewed

## *Fueling Forensics*

a total of 15 participants, who were relatively homogenous in terms of social characteristics, age, geographic region, and experience with forensics competition. However, the size of the teams students represented varied (see Table 1 for a summary of the demographic information of the participants).

### **Data Collection**

Page | 12

I conducted respondent interviews to learn more about individual events competitors' nutritional choices. Designed to elicit open-ended responses, respondent interviews focus on individuals who share appropriate experiences relevant to a particular study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Although participants speak to their own behaviors and motivations, the focus on shared experiences makes respondent interviews useful for understanding similarities and differences among groups, such as forensic competitors (Tracy, 2013). I followed the same procedures in both phases of data collection. Prior to conducting the interviews, I emailed participants a short questionnaire to gather demographic information. My semi-structured interview protocol focused on the following topics: Participants' definitions of healthy nutritional choices; perceptions of the connection between nutrition and competitive forensic performance; consumption habits during tournaments; how participants engaged in dialogue with teammates and coaches about nutritional choices; and, students' overall perceptions of the health and wellness environment at tournaments. Although my interview questions provided a structure for the conversation, I allowed participants to negotiate talk and topic shifts as they shared their experiences (Riessman, 2008). My approach sought to privilege students' perspectives, and the conversations were broad enough to identify a diverse range of topics for future areas of research as well.

Interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone, based on what was most convenient for the participants. Conversations ranged from 15-60 minutes and averaged approximately 20 minutes in length. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Additionally, I took detailed notes during the conversations to document questions, recurrent stories and issues, and theoretical connections (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

I followed Tracy's (2013) iterative analysis process to make sense of my data. Rather than using theory as an a priori, deductive resource, scholars who employ an iterative approach move between the data and theory to develop, refine, and reflect on emergent knowledge claims. To begin, I used data analysis software (QDA DataMiner) to organize and immerse myself in the transcripts. During the initial readings, I created first-level codes to trace repeated ideas and themes discussed by the participants. As I developed the initial codes, I began to notice the influence of regulative rules and logical forces articulated in participants' accounts. In subsequent readings of the transcripts, I refined the initial codes by analyzing them in relation to CMM theory and negative cases in the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Additionally, I strove to be reflexive about how my perspectives as a former forensic competitor and health communication scholar

Kerber

influenced the development of knowledge claims (see Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Charmaz, 2005). My readings of the data resulted in an understanding of how competition acts as a paradoxical logical force influencing students' nutritional choices: First, it underscored the regulative rules students used to guide their decisions. Second, it enabled students to compose coherence on their actions when constraints made it difficult to follow their own rules.

Page | 13

### **Eating to Compete: Connecting Nutritional Choices to Performance**

Thirteen of the fifteen participants connected the quality of their nutritional choices to their competitive success at forensics tournaments. One student noted, "I definitely do a lot better and feel better when I make sure I eat enough and of the right stuff." Competition emerged as a "felt force" as participants explained specific regulative rules, or norms developed through messages from educators and peers, that shaped their eating behaviors during tournaments (Bruss et al., 2005; Cronen et al., 1982). According to Rose (2006), regulative rules are "meaning structures" that instruct individuals on how they ought to "manage the unfolding sequence of actions in a social episode" (p. 178). As a component of these meaning structures, "felt forces" describe the moral position associated with actions in a particular context (Cronen et al., 1982). Moreover, the felt forces emerging from interaction are frequently interlocked with personal experiences, and used to guide actions (Rose, 2006). The participants in this study coupled regulative rules with their own embodied experiences to describe how their eating behaviors were intended to provide a competitive advantage for forensic performances.

*"Thirteen of the fifteen participants connected the quality of their nutritional choices to their competitive success at forensics tournaments."*

The felt force of competition was initially apparent in how participants dichotomized nutritional choices as either "good" or "bad." Participants first described how it was important to make "good" nutritional choices to sustain energy levels throughout a tournament. Participants defined "good" foods as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins; whereas "junk foods" (defined as fried food, fast food, or candy) were labeled as "bad." Students particularly associated eating "good" foods with maintaining competitive vitality and focus across a lengthy tournament schedule (which can stretch from early mornings to late evenings, and across multiple days). For instance, one student described the simultaneous difficulty and importance of sustaining energy from the beginning of a tournament into the later elimination rounds. "We have so much less energy and so much less ability to perform at the same level," he stated, "It's harder to perform well if you're not loading yourself with energy earlier in the day." From this perspective, the quality of nutritional choices was associated with performance stamina and competitive success.

Although the quality of food consumed was viewed as important, students' comments indicated another regulative rule regarding quantity as well. Specifically, participants explained how consuming the "wrong" amount of food (defined as either eating too much or not enough)

### *Fueling Forensics*

contributed to indigestion, tiredness, and overall feelings of sickness. As a result, they noted carefully disciplining their food intake during tournaments to find an appropriate balance. One student said:

I never performed on a full stomach because sometimes it made me a little queasy. But at the same time, you don't want to perform without anything in your stomach because then you're always focusing on how hungry you are. So, you're kind of in a fine line between doing something, but not overdoing it.

Page | 14

Competition functioned as a logical force for managing food intake in other ways as well. Like the participants in Littlefield and Sellnow's (1992) study, half of the students said they consumed less food than usual at tournaments. Six students specifically noted the effects of stress on their appetite. One student explained, "I usually don't eat as much as I probably should, especially since in a high stress environment, I can't really stomach very much. I can get it down, but I'm just not hungry." Another student noted his concern with being monitored by fellow competitors and potential judges both inside and outside of rounds:

I wouldn't personally eat more or eat as much as I usually do at a tournament because I don't want to look like 'Hey, look how much he just ate.' I know that's stupid but, you've got people that are going to be watching you all the time.

Taken together, students' concerns about the embodied effects of consumption appeared to work in concert with felt forces regarding how their choices would affect competitive performance to guide action (Rose, 2006). However, it appears students' concerns about consumption and bodily discipline extends to how influential others may perceive their choices, and implicitly impact their competitive success as well.

Moreover, the perceived regulative rules linking nutritional choices and performance were more likely to be cited by participants with less forensics experience. As with previous studies (e.g., Olson, 2004a; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992), forensic educators were cited as important influencers for how students made nutritional choices during tournaments. Seven students said their coach(es) provided them with regular reminders to make healthy choices during tournaments. Three students noted their coach(es) specifically prompted them to eat during tournaments. For instance, a student said their coach "always makes sure that we have eaten something" in the morning. She continued, "And, if we are in the middle of the day, and [they] see us [they] say, 'Okay, you're looking kind of low on energy. Grab a granola bar. Take a drink of water.'" The other four students commented their coach(es) provided more periodic reminders about nutritional choices, with some direction being given at tournaments and other advice being offered during team meetings. Additionally, four students reported their coach(es) provided advice on other health-related behaviors, such as staying hydrated or getting physical activity outside of forensic competitions.

Peers also functioned as important influencers. Five students commented on specific

Kerber

examples of how their team members had noticed and responded to peers' nutritional choices. One student commented her team was often self-monitoring when it came to observing peers' choices, "We also have some team leadership that says, hey, try a Vitamin Water and not that Diet Coke." Another student similarly remarked her peers offered advice regarding healthier alternatives, "the team tries to encourage people to maybe don't get a Big Mac. Try a fruit and walnut salad." Additionally, five students reported team members encouraged each other to make choices to maintain their energy levels during a competition. The majority of participants indicated they viewed their peers' influence as helpful, even though peer surveillance and advice-giving of this type could potentially be perceived as paternalistic (see, for instance, Lupton, 1996).

Page | 15

In contrast, individuals with more forensics participation were particularly likely to draw upon embodied experiences rather than regulative rules to explain nutritional judgments. "I know that I need to eat periodically throughout the day. I know that granola is usually a good choice for me," one participant commented. Another participant explained he avoided eating chocolate and dairy products during a tournament because it had affected his voice at previous tournaments. It is possible that regulative rules are less meaningful for experienced competitors as they learn what their bodies need to compete at a high level. However, because regulative rules are reflexively interlocked with personal experiences, it is also possible that veteran competitors have internalized these felt forces (Rose, 2006).

*"Students justified deviations from regulative rules in the tournament context by emphasizing how competitive structures constrained their ability to follow desired norms."*

Although students discussed regulative rules used to fuel their competitive success, they noted the tournament environment presented contextual challenges for following these norms. In the next section, I discuss the constraints articulated by competitors, as well as how they sought to impose coherence upon their actions.

### **Imposing Coherence: Making Choices within Constraints**

Existing research has emphasized how time and resources create logistical challenges for implementing healthy tournament practices (Carmack, 2016). Students similarly pointed to the limited availability of healthy foods and time at tournaments as the key constraints for following their regulative rules. According to CMM theory, individuals negotiate meanings across multiple, and conflicting contexts to impose coherence on their actions (see Bruss et al., 2005). As participants discussed sacrificing the quality of their nutritional choices, their comments illustrated a second and paradoxical way competition emerged as a logical force: Students justified deviations from regulative rules in the tournament context by emphasizing how competitive structures constrained their ability to follow desired norms.

Providing free food to competitors is considered a health best practice for tournaments (Carmack, 2016). Many of the students reported that tournaments provided a limited number of

### *Fueling Forensics*

free breakfast items, as well as a meal at lunch. Participants said they found it helpful to have these meals available, but simultaneously noted the nutritional quality of the meals could be improved. “Best case scenario, it’s going to be sandwiches and some chips,” one student commented, “It’s kind of filling, so that’s good, but certainly not very good for you.” Students may not be aware of the cost-related challenges to providing tournament meals (see arguments by Carmack, 2016). However, participants noted that finding alternative, healthy options is limited to what is immediately available on or adjacent to campus. One student explained, “Usually, it’s a fast food restaurant or if there’s a stand there where they are selling something for you, it’s usually just something kind of fattening.” Two students mentioned they frequently found the dining options on campus to have limited hours during tournament weekends.

Page | 16

Participants reported time as another factor constraining their ability to make nutritional choices according to their regulative rules. Tournament schedules were described as a constraint for finding healthy food options, particularly if participants were unable to eat around conventional meal times. Although students noted meal breaks were often integrated into the schedules, the allotted time failed to account for when competitions lasted longer than expected. One student said, “We normally do get a lunch break but a lot of the rounds I’m in will go over. Then, I have another round quickly following lunch.” Participants compensated for the lack of time by choosing food options that were quick to locate and consume so they could resume competing. One student noted, “It’s just easier to grab something unhealthy because it’s normally an easier access.” The same students who commented on the length of meal breaks discussed how opportunities for meals were further complicated by competing in multiple events, and specifically, extemporaneous speaking (because of the preparation time required before a round). “I know lots of extempers have talked about it. They can pretty much kiss lunch goodbye,” one student stated. Another student who competed in extemporaneous speaking described:

I remember at least one instance last year that I came straight from a round. We were supposed to have had lunchtime between that round and the next draw and it was already time for that next draw. So I was eating while I was prepping, which is obviously not ideal for eating or performance.

Tournament schedules and limited food options were also described by participants as influencing what they ate at the end of a day, or at the end of a weekend competition. “We are normally at the school at seven, and then we don’t get done until eight or nine at night. That means a very early breakfast, a very quick lunch, and then a really late dinner,” one student explained, “So it’s hard on your body.” Because competition and award ceremonies frequently end later in the evenings, students characterized dinner as a meal where they indulged or strove to replenish what they were not able to consume during the competition, similar to Littlefield and Sellnow’s findings (1992). “I like eat what I didn’t get to most of the weekend,” one student explained, “All the stuff that I probably shouldn’t have or eat during the tournament.” Similarly, two other students reported they tended to eat more at the end of a tournament to celebrate their performance and being done with

Kerber

the competition.

Students described several individual and team approaches that enabled them to adapt to the issues of time and limited food availability during tournaments. Eight students, or slightly more than half of the participants, reported they brought food or beverages with them to tournaments. One student reported bringing breakfast items or granola bars to a typical weekend tournament, “but if it’s a longer tournament, I’ll buy sandwich spread and carrots and stuff like that to keep.” Another student described keeping pre-made peanut butter sandwiches in their bag to ensure they would have a lunch.

Page | 17

Likewise, six students indicated their team brought some kind of prepared meals or snacks to tournaments for their competitors. How the items were gathered differed by team: One student explained how his coach made arrangements with their campus’ dining services to provide food for travel because competitors were missing meals they had paid for. Typical provisions were described as including “a basket of fruit, some chopped up carrots and celery sticks; more healthier food we could snack on.” Four other participants said students on their respective teams contributed non-perishable items (e.g., granola bars, trail mix, peanut butter, crackers) to a basket that competitors could snack from during tournaments. Another student described how his coach kept a cooler in the team vehicle stocked with applesauce, chips, and sandwich-making supplies during tournaments.

Two additional students said they would bring more of their own foods to tournaments, but healthy options were limited because of the perceived lack of refrigeration and heating options available during competitions. Moreover, students who do not bring food with them (or come from teams that bring food) indicated they are still able to adapt and find meal options on campus in most circumstances. “Worst case scenario?” one student explained, “I usually find a vending machine or something.” Although the student said this was not an ideal option for fueling for a tournament, it ensured he was at least able to eat during the competition.

In summary, forensic students experience competition as a paradox for their nutritional choices: On one hand, the desire for competitive success influences regulative rules that shape consumption patterns. On the other hand, the structure and logistics of competition simultaneously creates constraints for students to effectively follow such rules. As health communication research using CMM theory has revealed, it is important for educators and practitioners to consider how communication at multiple levels (individual, team, and the broader organization of forensic activity) creates larger patterns of meaning (Bruss et al., 2005). In other words, what patterns do our interactions about wellness in forensics co-construct together (Pearce & Pearce, 2000)?

## Discussion

My study sought to expand understandings of how individual events competitors make sense of their nutritional judgments during competitions, and provide support for continued

## Fueling Forensics

research and practice related to health issues in forensics. Understanding how competition functions as a logical force to both enable and constrain students' choices offers important theoretical and practical insights.

From a theoretical perspective, CMM offered a useful heuristic for exploring how forensic competitors made sense of wellness-related messages from peers and educators, and attempted to use those meanings to guide their behaviors in the tournament context. My findings illustrated how regulative rules worked in tandem with embodied experiences to shape the moral forces influencing participants' actions (Rose, 2006). Although CMM theory establishes that experiences and interactions are intertwined in reflexive consideration, how this process works is less clearly defined and merits additional research. For example, less experienced forensic competitors were more likely to cite messages from others as the sources of felt forces and regulative rules influencing their nutritional choices. However, veteran competitors cited more embodied experience to describe their eating behaviors. More study is needed to understand whether felt forces and regulative rules are stronger when individuals are new to a particular context and are learning patterns of appropriate behavior, or if these norms are internalized as individuals become more familiar with specific communicative episodes.

From a practical perspective, students not only have a basic awareness of how nutrition affects their forensic performance, they use this understanding to develop regulative rules in search of a competitive advantage. Their perceptions are supported by public health discourses that link nutrition to cognitive functioning and physical performance (e.g., Rodriguez, DiMarco, &

*“Forensic educators are uniquely situated for helping students understand the importance of self-care in the tournament environment, as well as how this knowledge can be applied to effective performance in other personal, educational, and professional contexts.”*

Langley, 2009; Taras, 2005). Likewise, Trejo (2004) noted, successful competitors are those who have discovered how to sustain “reservoirs of carefully tended energy . . . Most have undergone an alteration, which, despite their considerable determination and courage, is, quite simply physical” (p. 40). It is encouraging to see that students want to make good nutritional decisions. Yet, it is simultaneously concerning that consumption patterns are driven by competitive concerns, rather than concern for health.

To echo Olson (2004a), education is the first step in promoting a more wellness-oriented environment. Providing students with more education about the connections between nutrition and bodily performance could be a potential remedy for underscoring both the forensic and non-forensic values of enacting healthy behaviors. Forensic educators are uniquely situated for helping students understand the importance of self-care in the tournament environment, as well as how this knowledge can be applied to effective performance in other personal, educational, and professional contexts.

Kerber

Additionally, the study's findings demonstrate forensic educators must pay attention to the range of choices available to students for making nutritional judgments during competition. Carmack and Holm (2013) contended that when systems are not viable for healthy long-term participation, "we need to consider not *what* we are doing, but the *way* in which we do it" (p. 54). The participants' comments do reflect some areas of progress surrounding the efforts to improve wellness-related practices in forensics. The vast majority of students said their coaches and peers offer some form of positive guidance in relation to health behaviors. Participants also described efforts at the individual, team, and tournament levels to ensure adequate access to food during competitions. Some of these initiatives, particularly at the tournament level, have been documented by the existing research (Olson, 2004a; Schnoor, 2004; Trejo, 2004; Workman, 2004). However, students' comments demonstrated how persistent constraining factors remain within forensics, making it complicated for them to eat healthfully during competitions. For instance, participants indicated work could still be done to calibrate the length of meal breaks, improve the quality of available foods, and potentially provide options for storing and/or heating meals during tournaments.

Page | 19

Strikingly, students did share concerns over the tensions between the desire to improve the forensics wellness environment and the material challenges (e.g., budgets, time, tournament schedules) for making effective structural changes within the activity. For instance, three students observed how lengthening meal breaks could make tournaments longer or travel even more difficult and expensive for their teams. One-third of the participants similarly acknowledged concerns for how making health-focused changes to team or tournament practices would impact their team's budget. As forensic educators continue to make incremental efforts to implement wellness-related activities, it will be important to more formally assess the effectiveness of these efforts, their impacts on students' and coaches' health-related behaviors, and any (un)anticipated consequences.

### **Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

As an interpretive study, my findings are generalizable only to the participant population and may not be representative of all forensic competitors. Despite participation from multiple regions of the country, students were primarily from Midwestern states. Future scholarship should explore differences in health-related practices across different regions of the country.

Additionally, the majority of the participants in the study were within their first or second year of competition at the intercollegiate level. Billings (2011) indicated the longer a student participated in forensics, the more likely they were to regard it as healthy. This potentially indicates students with more experience have identified ways to adapt to the competitive environment and/or make better nutritional and health-related choices during tournaments. More research is necessary to understand if there are patterned ways that veteran students adapt to the tournament environment and the impact of competition on their health and wellness.

### *Fueling Forensics*

Moreover, the scope of this study was limited to the nutritional choices made by forensic competitors. The participants raised a number of other issues that would be worthwhile to fully explore health-related behaviors in forensic participation. Some of the issues mentioned by participants have already surfaced in the existing literature, such as sleep deprivation and fatigue (Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Trejo, 2004), stress management (Billings, 2011; Quenette et al., 2007; Williams, 2003), alcohol, tobacco, and drug use (Billings, 2011; Littlefield & Sellnow; Williams et al., 2001), and the physical impacts of travel (Billings, 2002; Dickmeyer, 2002; Williams, 2003; Williams et al., 2001), but have not been examined in depth. Other concerns were relatively new, such as the (over)consumption of energy drinks, which were mentioned by one-third of the participants. Another two students discussed body image and its connection to (un)healthy eating behaviors. More exploration of these issues would yield insight into the discourses (both within and outside of forensics) influencing students' choices, and help forensic educators to focus on providing guidance that emphasizes good health, rather than aesthetic appearance. Finally, more research is needed to define the appropriate scope of wellness initiatives in forensics. Student-competitors are adults who make their own choices regarding health behaviors. How much education and advice ought to be provided to them? At what point do coach and peer influences on health-related choices veer from being helpful to overly paternalistic?

Despite the energy and attention that has been focused on forensics and health over the past two decades, the overall progress towards developing a more wellness-conscious environment has yet to be fully studied and assessed. Although incremental changes have been made, more research is needed to continue to make forensics a more sustainable activity for competitors and coaches alike.



Kerber

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Page | 23



*Fueling Forensics*

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Data</u>
Age	18 to 21 years ( $M = 19.73$ , $SD = 1.06$ )
Sex	Seven males, eight females ( $n = 15$ )
Years of Collegiate Forensic Participation	Participants had completed between 1-3 years of collegiate forensics ( $M = 1.67$ , $SD = .69$ ). Additionally, twelve of the participants reported they had also competed in high school forensics.
Geographic Location	The majority of the participants identified as being from Midwestern states ( $n = 8$ ); followed by Mideastern states ( $n = 2$ ), Southeastern states ( $n = 2$ ), and South central states ( $n=2$ ). One participant reported being from a Western state.
Team Size	The team size reported by participants varied ( $M = 21.86$ , $SD = 11.85$ ). The majority of participants came from teams with 10-20 competitors ( $n = 6$ ) or teams with more than 20 competitors ( $n = 6$ ). Three students said their teams had fewer than 10 competitors.

