CREATING A CLIMATE OF SUPPORT FOR FORENSICS PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers three recommendations bearing on the general topic of administrative support and publicity. First, I urge the collection and dissemination of information about funding levels, activity levels, and instructional demands in forensics. This information would provide an important data base for directors of forensics who bear the primary responsibility for securing support for their forensics program and negotiating expectations that influence outside assessments of program quality and instructional performance. Second, a call for increased attention to non-competitive public service programs as a means of enhancing program visibility and reaffirming a commitment to speech as a means for public discussion and decision making is issued. Finally, greater focus on training undergraduate students interested in teaching speech activities is encouraged as a means of cultivating a supportive relationship between collegiate programs and high school forensics.

This paper examines the general topic area of administrative support and publicity by offering recommendations in two areas. In creating a climate of support, I suggest that program directors need information which would allow them to make a specific and persuasive case concerning what constitutes an "appropriate" level of institutional support for the activity. Adequate data about the funding, staffing, and activity levels that prevail in the forensics community would allow a more accurate assessment of what level of achievement and visibility a program might be expected to achieve given a specific level of support. I examine the issue of funding and staffing individual events programs and recommend that supportive information be made more readily available to forensics directors charged with the responsibility of negotiating on behalf of themselves and the programs they direct. Secondly, I suggest that

a serious commitment to the non-competitive aspects of forensics is a means of enhancing program status, visibility, and service. Initially, the relationship of college forensics programs to campus and community is explored and greater emphasis on non-competitive public events as a means of campus and community service is encouraged. Finally, I suggest that collegiate forensics cultivate a more supportive role relative to high school programs through undergraduate level training in forensics administration.

FUNDING AND STAFFING OF INDIVIDUAL EVENTS PROGRAMS

Obtaining financial support for programs, receiving adequate compensation for their efforts, and influencing the standards used in decisions on their promotion and tenure are responsibilities that weigh heavily on most directors of forensics. Work done by this and past developmental conferences provides important information to directors negotiating over the standards to be used in their performance assessment and/or seeking to enhance the support and recognition afforded their forensics programs. The recommendations offered by this and past conferences, while not prescriptive in nature, do express important goals and needs which can be important points of negotiation for directors seeking administrative support. Previous developmental conferences have offered a number of important recommendations concerning the initiation of new events and courses in forensics, academic credit for forensics involvement, work load of forensics directors, and requirements for promotion and tenure. Unfortunately, much of this important material has not found its way into the general forensics community where it might generate the type of examination, discussion, and perhaps alteration that this pioneering work sought to encourage. Specifically, our efforts can provide positive direction for programs seeking expansion, guidance to directors seeking equitable reward and recognition for their efforts, information to administrators in a position to provide support for forensics activities, and suggest avenues open to programs seeking publicity (on-campus and local) for their efforts.

I begin with the general conviction that this work group should seek wider distribution of the resolutions formulated at this conference. I am aware that the published proceedings of this conference, coupled with journal articles and convention papers investigating areas targeted by past conferences, aid in achieving this objective. Nonetheless, there are two problems with available information. First, for a variety of reasons, a number of program directors do not avail themselves of these sources. Second, research on funding levels, activity levels, and promotion and tenure practices are carried out in a variety of forums, making it difficult for program directors who wish to use this information in their negotiations for increased support.

In short, widely distributed brief information packets or summary sheets arguing the necessity of stable support and reasonable demands on instructional time, and providing statements of the value of forensics activities would
These conferences have repeatedly acknowledged that any assessment of their performance are often based on unrealistic expectations or demands which are excessive in light of the institutional support. I believe there are a number of instances where program directors find themselves undertaking monumental workloads with minimal compensation simply because the institution's administrators or the directors themselves are unaware of what level of activity, degree of financial support, or work load for the program director is "typical" within the forensics community.

While a variety of forms of information would be important to forensics directors, I believe the most important data would be information concerning average program size, funding, activity level, instructional demands, and release time. Consider, for example, the director of forensics who seeks increased support with the assumption that he/she is laboring under higher expectations and lower financial and administrative support than prevails in the forensics community at large. This is a solid basis for negotiation but, absent supporting material indicating "averages" in forensics activity, their requests are not likely to be persuasive. I recommend that information about budget, size, activity level, and relative demands of instructional time devoted to forensics should be collected and aggressively distributed. As mentioned previously, much of the information that could be included in such an endeavor already exists—the problem is one of dissemination.

Such information could serve as a resource for personnel in forensics involved in negotiations over funding levels. Additionally, such a database provides a helpful guide in assessing the relative quality of one's own program or, at the very least, provides a basis for discussing, the size, visibility, activity level, and competitive success of one's own program in light of what a forensics program is typically capable of doing given a specific level of institutional support. This effort is critical in light of previous conference recommendations which speak of "realistic" expectations for program directors. These conferences have repeatedly acknowledged that any assessment of directors' productivity should be made in light of the support available to them to carry out those tasks. The bottom line is that without information about typical levels of support it is difficult for directors or administrators to formulate a realistic appraisal of their forensic program since the number of students involved and scope of competitive and on-campus activities depend heavily on the level of funding and administrative support available.

Previous conferences have established some criteria for performance assessment, but have qualified their recommendations with somewhat vague references to the need for "reasonable," "appropriate," "realistic," or "adequate" funding and support. Admittedly, directors of forensics must have resources sufficient to do the job expected of them, but absent an adequate data base, it is difficult to make a strong case about the support required for a given program in a given circumstance. There is considerable persuasive difference in a general request for increased funding and that same request based on a solid assessment of what other programs are capable of doing when they operate at a particular level of support. The latter is only possible when information on funding and activity levels in the forensics community is made available.

It is difficult to fault administrators for underfunding programs when forensics directors have been unable to offer convincing arguments as to what constitutes a sufficient level of funding. Nor can administrators (often lacking a background in forensics) be blamed for holding their program directors to expectations in excess of what their budget allows when the administrators lack data that would help them make an informed budget decision. By the same token, it is difficult to fault forensics directors who "burn out" in overdemanding programs when they lacked the information to negotiate realistic standards and expectations for themselves based on an understanding of what is typical in the field. Years of attempting to do more for less take their toll.

It would be simplistic to suggest that information on program demographics is a cure-all. There are a variety of factors such as school size, institutional mission, program direction, and talent of personnel involved that influence program performance and stability. Nonetheless, it is an important starting point in insuring that directors of forensics do not find themselves continually trying to meet goals that exceed what their level of institutional support will allow. It seems appropriate that if so many of our resolutions about assessment of program quality and director performance imply a "realistic" level of funding, we should be prepared to offer some indication of what "realistic" funding is. Moreover, the recommendations by organizations like this developmental conference, while not prescribing directions for the activity, provide a reasonable indication of the goals and directions of the forensics community which may assist directors seeking data to support them in their negotiations with administrators on behalf of themselves and the activity they serve.

RELATIONSHIP OF INDIVIDUAL EVENTS PROGRAMS TO COLLEGES, UNIVERSITIES, AND COMMUNITIES

Two of the topics suggested for consideration by this work group direct
attention to the role of individual events programs in their respective institutions and communities. These areas are important in that they highlight the fact that forensics activities should not strive only to serve the interest of their student competitors but should take seriously their potential to serve the "non-participant." This conference should endorse service oriented efforts by forensics programs. Too often, competitive success is the sole motivation for participation in forensics. While previous conferences have justifiably noted that competition is a means to generate motivation and excellence, there have been warnings about the effects of an "excessive" competitive emphasis. Competitive emphasis can be considered "excessive" whenever it eclipses recognition of the value of non-competitive or public service endeavors. At its best, speech is a component of citizenship used to enlighten, elevate, or persuade others, and is a prerequisite to effective and informed public decision making. The benefits of forensics are more enduring than the trophies awarded after a successful competitive outing.

When we discuss expanding the role of forensics at the campus and community level, this should not mean simply that we invite "outsiders" to view, judge, or assist in competitive tournaments. The forensics community should more actively recognize, encourage, and reward programs involving public performances. Specifically, I envision programs where any interested student would be eligible to deliver persuasive or informative speeches in a public forum. Participants might discuss topics of national or community importance. The key ingredient is that such endeavors are motivated by a desire to present informed discourse and encourage public discussion on important topics. The motivation is educational rather than competitive.

Official recognition of non-competitive programs is essential. Such recognition could take the form of publishing the locations and dates for such events in the same way tournaments are announced. Announcement of outstanding participants could be undertaken in a manner similar to the way tournament results are published. Simply sending letters of congratulations to participants or host institutions would provide the necessary recognition. Such endorsements would enhance the credibility of these public programs and might serve to encourage participation. More importantly, national recognition of these events demonstrating the forensics community's appreciation of public programs might elevate the importance administrators are willing to attach to "non-tournament" events when assessing their school's forensics program and the director's contribution.

A variety of options for such public forums are available—they could involve students in forensics, students from speech classes, interested students on campus, faculty, members of the community and/or invited guest speakers as participants. Many institutions have successfully promoted these activities to honor their campus' outstanding speakers. I have no objection to this competitive angle, but it should not overshadow public service as the primary justification for such efforts.

Activities of this type need not come at the expense of a college's competitive program—in terms of their public relations value and potential for attracting new students to forensics, such endeavors are complementary. To engage the more pragmatic concerns of how efforts in the public forum influence administrative support and publicity, I offer the following justifications: First, well publicized and attended public forums focus campus and community attention on the forensics program and can enhance campus and community appreciation for forensics training.

Second, well received public programs are advertisements for the institution which hosts them and are tangible evidence of the public service most institutions purport to provide.

Third, students interested in speaking activities, but not in competitive forensics, may benefit from this type of participation. We should not be lurking in the wings to recruit the most promising speakers to our competitive programs but rather take seriously the responsibility to provide opportunities for a variety of students with varying interests and levels of commitment which was affirmed by earlier developmental conferences.

Fourth, such events could be co-sponsored with departments and student or community groups to the mutual benefit of all sponsors. Such joint endeavors increase cooperation and goodwill.

Finally, forensics teams might seek outside sponsorship of public events from businesses which rely heavily on communication competence (for example, law firms, public relations firms, political organizations, advertising and marketing agencies). Such joint endeavors with the business community provide advertising for the business sponsor and an important affirmation of the fact that skill and practice in communication are recognized and rewarded outside the confines of the university.

Public events need the sanction of national organizations in forensics. An overt endorsement of their value by this body would go a long way in demonstrating that such programs are recognized as an important component of our work in forensics.

**COLLEGIATE TRAINING IN SUPPORT OF HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

As a final recommendation, I propose that institutions should strengthen their commitment to offering training in forensics administration at the undergraduate level. Such a recommendation is appropriate in a work group concerned with administrative support since it focuses attention on the fact that colleges and universities have a supportive role to play relative to high school programs. Past conferences have addressed the need to offer theory based courses in forensics and administrative training at the graduate level, however,
our undergraduates' training is often only thorough competitive participation or occasional low level administrative work at tournaments we sponsor. I believe that our students who enter coaching at the high school level are not well served by the degree of preparation that most institutions offer in forensics administration.

Courses in directing forensics could stand on their own, be integrated into existing offerings in forensics or teacher training courses within the speech major, or offered as a component of an institution's education track. An active internship program allowing our undergraduates "hands on" training with high school programs would also be appropriate.

A commitment to offerings in directing forensics by speech departments provides an affirmation that forensics coaching is a career option. Students might be enticed by such offerings if they understand that training in the area might make them more marketable. Most importantly, such courses demonstrate the college or university commitment to high school forensics, result in increased contact between high school and university educators in the field, and provide more complete instruction.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, the recommendations advanced here are premised on the belief that collegiate forensics programs can enhance their status, visibility, and, ultimately, degree of administrative support by pursuing a vigorous program of campus, community, and high school service in addition to their competitive efforts. I have argued that such efforts are more likely to be undertaken and rewarded when they receive the credibility of an overt endorsement by this developmental conference. I have also argued that program directors are benefited by a more active distribution of information about staffing, funding, activity level, and instructional commitments that prevail in the forensics community. Clear information about expectations and practices within the forensics community provides the raw material for directors who, in negotiating for support and recognition for their efforts, need some means of making the case that their efforts and level of performance are consistent with (or perhaps exceed) what is typical in the forensics community. At the very least, it is important that during negotiations for support we be able to provide a reasonably precise estimate of what we are capable of doing given a specific level of institutional support.