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# A Call for Research to Sustain the Activity and the Discipline

Todd Holm

*Marine Corps University*, [todd.holm@gmail.com](mailto:todd.holm@gmail.com)

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## Editor's Note

# A Call for Research to Sustain the Activity and the Discipline

Todd T. Holm

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As the editor of this journal and someone who sits on the editorial boards of other journals and reviews submissions for the National Communication Association's convention for multiple groups, I see a lot of scholarship. Some of the submissions are from established scholars and some come from scholars who are still in the formative years of their academic careers. Some of the submissions are really very good, and some of the submissions seem hastily put together and more like a rough draft you would send to a colleague than something you would send to a journal editor. Surprisingly, there isn't necessarily a correlation between the point in an academic career and the quality of the submission. I think most of my reviewers would agree that when we get a submission that isn't very good but it is clear the author(s) has taken time to construct something that is more than just their thoughts put down on paper, we feel something like an obligation to nurture that scholar through the publication process. We are proud of them when, after multiple revisions, they produce something that they can be proud of and contributes in some significant way to the scholarship in our field.

The disappointment I most often experience is when I see good presentations at NCA but then rarely see those NCA papers and panels developed into something more permanent and accessible to our discipline. This is especially true in the forensic community. While *Speaker & Gavel* is open to research from all across the communication spectrum, our anchor is intercollegiate speech and debate scholarship. *Speaker & Gavel* is one of a half-dozen journals that actively solicit submissions about forensic competition. These journals often struggle to get enough quality submissions to produce a meaningful issue a couple times a year. The number of papers and panels at state, regional, and national conferences and conventions that address important issues in forensics should yield more than enough articles to fill our journals. In true forensic form, this editor's note will look at the causes, effects, and solutions to what the editor of *Speaker & Gavel* claims may be *a sign of the end of days* (that particular editor is prone to exaggeration and referring to himself in the third person).

## Causes

The primary reasons forensics professionals don't publish are fairly obvious. They don't have time to research and write, and often they are not required to publish to keep their positions. I spent 25 years as an active coach. I was often told the average life expectancy of a director of forensics was five years. The directors didn't die; they just left the activity and took positions that involved more teaching, had research requirements, or were in administration. I worked at places that expected me to present and publish my scholarship, and I worked at places that did not (and one place that subtly discouraged me from publishing). I maintained a research agenda throughout because I believe it is important, but few coaches maintain an active research agenda while running a nationally competitive team. I'm not saying it isn't done; I'm saying it isn't common. When Gill (1990) looked at why forensic coaches quit or considered quitting forensics, the single biggest contributing factor was the amount of time the activity takes up. Research puts an additional time burden on an already time-strapped coach.

Being a coach or director is a time intensive activity. Finding the forensics-life balance is hard and failing to find that balance can lead to burnout (Carmack & Holm, 2013). Cutting your research agenda will significantly increase the amount of time you have available for coaching and allow you to get a couple more hours of sleep. Many departments that value forensic programs will decide to "help" coaches by reducing their research expectations. Faculty evaluations are adjusted accordingly and, before you know it, the coach hasn't published anything in five years; yet, they are still burning out because they added more tournaments, expanded the size of the team, started on-campus performances, or started hosting new tournaments because, now that they weren't trying to research and publish, they had more time for those things.

Forensic professionals also hit a stumbling block when scholarship published in forensic journals isn't given the same weight by their promotion and tenure committee as research in non-forensic journals. Some journals are not interested in even reviewing a submission with a large quantitative data set and significant findings if based in a forensic context. I once had the editor of a journal focusing on instructional communication politely explain in an email that the readers of that journal wouldn't be interested in a quantitative article that was the product of grant funded research that compared the success of graduate students with a forensics background to graduate students without a forensics background. I find it hard to believe that readers wouldn't want to know what characteristics the most successful graduate students share, but reviewers at that journal never got the chance to see the manuscript. It received a desk-reject because it was a forensic article. It did find a home in the *Journal of the Association of Communication Administrators*, so the research time was not wasted. It also shows that there are journals who are interested in research related to forensics issues outside of forensics journals.

Coaches and directors don't have the time, they are often told they don't need to publish to keep their jobs, and some journals aren't even interested in the research when it is submitted. With all of these factors working against publishing and a lot of other "alligators close to the boat"

needing immediate attention, *research* is often limited to a last-minute discussion panel at NCA. Unfortunately, the reduced requirement to publish is hurting coaches and the activity.

### Effects

Not publishing negatively impacts coaches and the activity as a whole. The axiom “publish or perish” is true on many levels. While it was originally coined to show the importance of a record of publication in the academy, the fact is that publishing is an important part of teaching (or coaching) because it has ripple effects in the classroom, discipline, and ideally, our world. Forensic practitioners are uniquely positioned to have significant impacts in all three of these areas if we prioritize our responsibilities as scholars. That, as they say, is the carrot. Here is the stick: When forensic professionals don’t publish, it handicaps them professionally, leads to burnout, and stagnates the activity. Boyer (1990) rightfully notes that “to counter burnout or stagnation, scholarship in its fullest sense must be acknowledged” (p. 44) Boyer was pushing an agenda that would allow coaches and directors to count student performances as part of their scholarship, but he was not limiting scholarship to just non-traditional formats. He saw and acknowledged research, publication, and scholarship in all its forms as a critical component of the professorate.

Removing the research requirement endangers coaches and directors professionally. Even if the coach/director has been assured there is no need to publish, there is no denying that higher education is operating in uncertain times. Federal and state funding has been significantly cut and “colleges have had to balance budgets by reducing faculty, limiting course offerings, and in some cases closing campuses” (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017, p. 1). Even with full departmental support, when it comes time to reduce faculty because of budget cuts, it is easy for even a novice administrator to look at annual reviews and see that the forensic coach/director has no publication history. At most traditional four-year institutions publication is the coin of the realm. So the math becomes easier when an administrator sees one faculty member has no publications, teaches a reduced load, and spends money on traveling with students (especially if the team doesn’t have a strong presence on campus) while a second faculty member has no release time, agrees to teach an overload, and has even just one publication a year. This isn’t complex math. When someone must be cut, it is easy to justify cutting the person without publications.

At many institutions, not publishing makes it very difficult to get promotions and move up through the academic ranks because promotion generally requires publication. In the unfortunate event that a coach falls victim to budget cuts, the coach is now dumped into the job market where they compete against people who have been teaching just as long but who also have a record of publication. Or, if the coach decides to get out of forensics, they are lucky if they can move into another line within their department and a new coach can be hired. If they can’t move into a line within their department, they are significantly disadvantaged in the job search without a record of publication. If they have risen to the level of associate professor after 10+ years of service to their institution but they have no record of publication, it is unlikely they will be able

to go to a different institution without dropping in rank: It is the “golden handcuffs” of the forensic world.

Research and publication serves as more than just a check box on an annual evaluation. Research is part and parcel to living the life of the mind. More than 30 years ago, Ernest Boyer (1987) in his book *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* pointed out “scholarship is not an esoteric appendage; it is at the heart of what the profession is all about” (p. 131). Forensic coaches and directors are among the smartest, most creative, and most intellectually nimble people I know. Engaging in research stimulates the intellectual mind, generates enthusiasm, and builds emotional resilience. Publishing gives a feeling of accomplishment and professional validation. Those factors are key in preventing burnout. Unfortunately, we have created systems that allow coaches and directors to avoid these mentally and emotionally healthy options. “When we create systems that are not sustainable or viable for healthy long-term professional participation, we need to consider not what we are doing, but the way in which we do it” (Carmack & Holm, 2013, p. 54). When departments look for ways to reduce the time commitments of forensic coaches and directors, they need to avoid opting for the quick and cheap option of not requiring research and publication. There are other ways to reduce the time burden placed on these professionals that does not hobble their careers. Departments should look for ways to more fully support coaches and directors. Providing a lighter teaching load, undergraduate or graduate students to serve as research assistants or teaching assistant, providing an administrative assistant who can make hotel reservations, reserve vehicles, and handle bookkeeping are relatively low cost ways to unburden coaches and directors. Encouraging and even incentivizing research and publication during the summer months, ensuring that coaches and directors have funding to travel to professional conferences and conventions, and assigning a publishing mentor to help forensics professionals stay on track and feel supported.

Forensic professionals can write with extreme clarity and conciseness from years of training and practice. Their ability to synthesize information and develop sound arguments has been honed by years of coaching students to do those things. Intellect, creativity, analytical thinking, and the ability to concisely communicate ideas in writing are increasingly rare skillsets. They are skills that give an academic great power, and if we learned nothing else from the last half dozen Spiderman movies it is that *with great power comes great responsibility*. Forensic professionals have a responsibility, an obligation, to research and publish. While it helps them personally, it also helps the activity.

## **Solutions**

Over the last 30 years I have attended a lot of NCA panels that discussed how forensics is stagnating, failing to innovate, is not open to new ideas, uses a cookie cutter approach, or is generally too formulaic. I have listened to outstanding discussions on how we could make changes to events, tournaments, coaching practices, and travel. I have enjoyed several panels about how we could encourage and reward innovation in the activity. But I generally watched those panels with five to ten other people (sometimes fewer than that). Many members of the

audience were graduate students in their first year as a coach. They looked around the room and saw that usually no one from the biggest and most competitively successful programs was in the audience (and often not on the panel). They rightfully concluded that the activity is not interested in changing or evolving. Couple that with 90-minute business meeting discussions on the minutia of how to word the description of extemporaneous speaking with regards to the use of notecards with active, passionate, and even heated participation by representatives of most of the top teams in the country and we send a clear message about what is (and is not) important to us as a community.

Panels and papers at national conferences and conventions are good starting places for the discussions we need to have, but the fact is they reach a limited number of people and rarely reach the movers and shakers of the activity. Publishing thought pieces in forensic journals is an excellent way to get people talking about practices, give new coaches an opportunity to really think about issues, and record for posterity's sake the state of the forensic community. On a more fundamental level, we need to publish quantitative and qualitative research on forensics so that we can answer basic questions posed by administrators and see trends in our own activities.

If a freshly minted PhD started at a new school and sat down with the dean of the college to pitch the idea of a forensic team, they would be hard pressed to answer basic questions about intercollegiate forensics. While they might have an operational understanding of the activity and could no doubt start and direct a successful program, they would find it difficult to find research on key issues that the dean would no doubt ask about. For example, try answering these questions (feel free to research for the answers).

1. How many intercollegiate forensic programs are there nationally? (Saying how many teams attended AFA or NFA last year is not enough; there are also debate nationals, Greek organization nationals, novice nationals, Christian nationals, and many programs that do not attend national tournaments.)
2. What is the average budget of a forensic team? (Again, there might be a couple of schools with huge budgets but there are a lot more with very small budgets, so the average is maybe lower than you would think. Perhaps it would be more helpful to give the *mode*, within a range. Go find that.)
3. How many coaches does the average team have?
4. Do coaches receive release time and, if so, how much and how is it determined?
5. How are teams usually funded (student activity fees, department funds, university budget, fundraising, etc.)?
6. Our biggest rival doesn't have a team; why should we?
7. How would this team help fulfill our liberal arts mission?
8. Can't students get the same thing from performing on campus?
9. How does this benefit the students who are not on the team?
10. Can you show me that participation in this activity significantly impacts the students?

These are very reasonable and very basic questions, but finding the answers (assuming there are

answers available) can take days and then might only be found through a network of connections to established forensic professionals who happen to know where information is tucked away. That is unfortunate; this information and more should be at our fingertips.

We have the brilliant minds needed to bolster this body of scholarship. We owe it to ourselves, our activity, and our discipline to research and publish scholarship that informs our community about the activity that is so important to our lives and so relevant to our society. I understand that time is a precious and finite commodity. I also understand that coaches and directors of forensic programs will never *find* time to research and publish. But I also know we *make* time for the things we feel are important. I would encourage everyone in this activity to make time for forensic research. I look forward to receiving your submissions.

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