
PERSONNEL REQUIREMENTS IN FORENSICS EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Twice during the past decade and a half, members of the forensics community have previously gathered for national developmental conferences. In neither instance was the role of the graduate assistant (GA) in the forensics program, much less the realm of individual events, a topic for consideration. Discussions of the function of GAs were, at best, peripheral to other items of concern. Any omission of this topic from the broader agenda of relevant issues in forensics is unfortunate, as GAs are critical to the present and future of organized forensics in this nation.

Presently, the maintenance of a number of forensics programs depends upon the availability of graduate students to serve as assistants. Graduate students benefit programs in many ways, not the least of which is their status as cheap, and frequently ignorant, labor. They are cheap because probably few academic institutions pay them close to minimum wage for the time they truly commit to the activity. At some colleges, assisting the forensics program is part of a broader set of departmental service requirements incumbent of all graduate assistants. Consequently, forensics time is not directly compensated. At other schools, the \$2000-3000 salary supplement they receive for forensics coaching and travel time will average to about \$4/hour or less. My own institution hires five forensics GAs for less than half the salary required for a faculty assistant director of forensics. To its credit, our university does provide the students with an excellent range of benefits, including full dental and health care coverage.

I suggest that GAs are ignorant, not necessarily regarding forensics, but of the ways in which they are used by higher education institutions to keep costs as low as possible. I do not contend that this is done maliciously, but it is rather part of a trend to greater reliance on relatively inexpensive part-time instructors. Some universities, particularly the larger research-based institutions, have found it cheapest to have graduate students not only assist, but also fully direct, their forensics programs. Like an illegal immigrant to this nation, the

GA anxiously accepts a position, ignorant of the faculty displacement that occurs.

Why do we need this cheap labor at all? Why are the GAs necessary for our forensics programs? To begin with, they greatly expand the number of students that forensics programs can accommodate. While as a solo director of forensics I would find it difficult to attend to the needs of much more than 20 students, GAs allow our program to regularly serve more than 100 students each year. Many of these students were first exposed to the program through classes taught by the GAs.

GAs also make the modern large, multi-event tournament possible. Few schools could cover the judging commitment demanded from 20 or more entries in a 3-event pattern without the aid of GAs or a sizable judging fee. Even then, the fee must go to pay others to judge, usually GAs from another school hiring themselves out for minimum wage. Consequently, even those schools lacking a graduate program ultimately rely on the existence of GAs. How many of our departmental colleagues volunteer to spend their weekends listening to 30 to 60 students involved in prose reading, informative speaking or impromptu? Were tournaments to depend on such voluntary faculty service, they would be tiny reflections of their present size.

Without question, the nature of modern forensics is shaped by the GA. But so too is the future of forensics. Where are we to find tomorrow's directors of forensics? They are today's GAs, just as certainly as most of today's forensics directors were once GAs themselves. The experiences they face, the training and encouragement that they receive, the reactions that they have to coaching will determine the character of forensics' future. Given these facts, it is ever more remarkable that the role of GAs was only briefly discussed in the previous developmental conferences.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

It is likely that little previously mentioned is highly controversial. The purpose of this position paper is not to ignite discontent with the present role of GAs, but rather to focus attention on a select number of issues regarding GAs that should be of interest to the forensics community and, particularly, to programs employing them. My comments and speculations represent my own experiences as a GA during masters and doctoral work, including responsibility for directing a forensics program during doctoral study. These thoughts are also a function of having worked with some two dozen GAs during my 13 years as a full-time faculty director of forensics.

STUDENT-TEACHER ROLE CONFLICT

By their very nature GAs are required to wear two very different hats - one as a graduate student and the other as a forensics instructor and critic. It is inevitable that these dual responsibilities will at some times be in conflict. (This condition is not unique to forensic GAs, but applies to all graduate stu-

dents who must work to afford their education. It is exacerbated, however, by the enormous time demands made on forensics GAs.) The GA faced with a choice between student needs - preparing for an evening's graduate class, researching the presentation due in three weeks, or working on the draft for a thesis chapter- and teaching responsibilities explaining forensics to an interested student, listening to or videotaping a rehearsal, or driving competitors 200 miles to a weekend tournament - will far too often sacrifice their own well-being as graduate students for the good of the program. We are more likely to applaud such dedication instead of asking why must the student be forced into this no-win situation. Why must a graduate student's education be traded for a larger, more efficiently administered forensics program?

This problem is even greater for the GA who accepts the role and additional obligations as a forensics director. It appears that an ever greater number of major research universities have chosen this route to managing their forensics program. In such cases the GA has no source of feedback or advice on direction of the program. Decisions on all program activities, from securing funding to establishing standards for student conduct, are based on the GAs previous experience.

What can be done to resolve this conflict?

1. Any forensics graduate assistantship should come with an attached warning that acceptance may be hazardous to one's academic health.
2. No GA should be required to perform forensics duties that occur in conflict with graduate course work. No Thursday or Monday evening course work should be sacrificed for driving the 800 miles to or from another tournament. Possibly the length of tournaments would cease expanding.
3. No graduate student should serve as a forensics director. The demands on a GA to direct any adequate program are staggering. In addition, the experience required will frequently, though not always, be beyond their capacity. Lucy Keele and Kenneth Anderson (1975) noted at the National Developmental Conference on Forensics that direction of the forensics program by a graduate student is the last step taken before elimination of that program. The inherently transitory leadership that GAs provide, at a minimum, condemns a program to dramatic changes in quality. It is fair to neither competitors nor the GA for universities to create the false dilemma of a GA-lead program or no program at all.

GA AS FORENSIC CRITIC

"Perhaps more than any other criticism, the forensics community is especially vulnerable on the issue of judge competency. Quality has been sacrificed on numerous occasions in tournaments to accommodate efficiency of tournament operation and to accommodate a large quantity of entries... Often forgotten in the scurry ... is the fact that the judge has a principal role to play, that of an educator... Creating a condition of

competency in a critic necessitates as much, if not more, educational training than does creating a condition of competency in the forensic competitor (Hanson, 1984, 92)."

If, as C. T. Hanson proposes, there are serious questions about the quality of judging at forensics tournaments, GAs cannot be considered responsible for the entire problem. To a substantial extent, however, GAs contribute to the difficulty. Part of this is due to the lack of undergraduate course work that prepares students to be forensics educators, while part is due to the unique nature of the GA as forensics critic.

Thirteen years ago Wayne Callaway (1975) observed that "the would-be director of forensics has few classroom opportunities for preparation" (157). It seems unlikely that the trend over the succeeding years has reversed this situation. Prior to appointment as a GA, most students will find their only groundwork in forensics education to be experience as a competitor. Some GAs may even lack this background. Nevertheless, within a few weeks of becoming a GA, the new graduate student becomes the front line in the primary objective of forensics, to train better communicators.

There are those who contend that we should not be concerned about lack of preparation, that anyone can be a forensics judge. While I do not doubt the ability of many lay-judges to rank students according to their own standards, standards that may be universally accepted, few of the lay-judges understand the necessity and manner of providing feedback and guidance. It does competitors little good to only know they received a 3rd-Good evaluation or even a 1st-Superior. The untrained critic cannot move the student toward improvement as a communicator.

The GA as critic not only frequently suffers from a lack of training as an educator and a failure to value the pedagogical objectives of forensics, but may also operate with a number of biases. It is indeed difficult to fairly evaluate students who were your close friends or bitter enemies only months earlier. Previous rivalries with particular competitors or even schools cannot be instantly erased from the GA's memory.

What do we do to resolve these problems?

1. All departments of speech communication should be encouraged to offer courses in the philosophy and methods of directing forensics. Short of accomplishing this goal, local, state and regional organizations should provide workshops for new GAs.
2. The home department of forensics programs should provide adequate faculty support to cover all judging commitments at the beginning of the year. Our activity should not be subject to Keele and Anderson's (1975) criticism: "When directors sit behind their desks and send graduate assistants, debaters are robbed of the superior contribution of the most knowledgeable theorists. Some of the practices found objectionable in competitive forensics would be

eliminated if all directors were more actively involved in the coaching and critiquing of debate and related events" (152). The director need not attend every competition, but additional faculty members should be available to handle a portion of the burden.

3. National tournaments should make minimal or no use of first-year GAs as critics. Such competition deserves only the best trained and least biased judging. While this will likely strain the ability of some schools to cover their judging obligation, those commitments should be more than to provide a warm body sitting in the back of a room.

CONCLUSION

The failure of previous National Developmental Conferences to discuss issues surrounding the use of graduate students as forensics assistants has meant that several problems connected to forensics have gone unresolved. Given the importance of GAs to the present and future of forensics, this negligence is unjustified. This position paper has addressed two such issues—the student-teacher role conflict and the GA as tournament critic.

These problems result from the decision of many speech communication departments to staff their forensics programs with graduate students instead of full-time faculty members. While this undoubtedly saves the institution considerable money, it shortchanges the forensic student population. Departments should not staff forensics programs with any greater GA/faculty ratio than that used for their classes, as both are elements in a well-rounded speech education. The ultimate choice is between expediency and quality in the design of a forensics program. The balance selected for forensics should not be out of equilibrium with that chosen for the department's entire educational program.

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