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**MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM UNDERGRADUATE COMPETITOR  
TO GRADUATE ASSISTANT COACH**

**MICHAEL KIRCH  
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY**

Bill Cosby might well have been speaking to new forensics graduate assistants when he said, "I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody." Each year a new crop of successful undergraduate students must make the often difficult transition from undergraduate competitor to graduate assistant coach. In fact, a 1987 study of the "top fifty" forensics programs revealed that "the number of programs with graduate students or law assistants outnumbered the programs without about three to two" (Hunt, 1987, P. 15). While the study fails to differentiate between programs with debate, individual events, or indeed both, it is reasonably safe to assume that there are a large number of students making this transition while coaching individual events each year.

Although the title of this paper fails to focus on those students new to the forensics arena, I have endeavored to include them in the following sets of advice. Additionally, while I will confine my discussion to those graduate students in individual events programs, much of the advice should be applicable to graduate students working in debate oriented programs as well. The eight pieces of advice are grouped around three ideas; setting expectations, your changing role, and coaching. All of the advice is either a product of my own experience as a graduate forensics assistant or a product of the accumulated wisdom of many of my peers and mentors. None of the advice is written in stone. Use that advice which best pertains to your own particular situation.

#### SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Two pieces of advice fall under this heading. The first concerns your desire for a fulfilling graduate education and the second, your tenure as a forensics assistant. Both take advantage of prior planning and clear communication.

Prior to starting classes or at least within the first few weeks, try to decide what you wish to accomplish in graduate school. Is it your desire to be involved in a research project by the end of the year? How many conventions would you like to attend? What grade point average do you aspire to earn and maintain? When would you like to be finished with your degree? These and questions like these will help you to better realize some concrete goals for your graduate education. Next check with an advisor to make sure that the goals you have set are both reasonable and attainable. This list of expectations should then be referred to throughout the year as an indicator of the progress you are making. Remember that because you are not acclimated to graduate work, your first semester may very well be your most difficult. It will certainly be your most hectic. In this climate of constant reorientation it can be easy to lose sight of long term educational goals. Realize also that your job will be even more difficult because you will constantly have to coach and travel an individual events team.

The second set of expectations that you must set are those related to your

forensics appointment. A forensics assistantship usually requires a tremendous commitment of both time and energy. As such, it is important to work out some realistic expectations with regard to your job performance. Work with the faculty in charge of your position to establish a set of assistantship responsibilities and endeavor to make them as clear as possible with set standards for evaluation. For example, how many hours must you coach each week? How many weekends a semester are you committed to travel? What administrative functions are you to fulfill? Although forensics assistants usually put in more time than they are "officially" given release time for, it is important to remember that most departments set an amount of release time that you are not "required" to work beyond. Most importantly, it should be understood by all concerned parties that your graduate education takes precedent over your assistantship duties. After all, your continued education is your primary reason for being in graduate school.

#### YOUR CHANGING ROLE

There are three main ways in which your role has now changed from that of an undergraduate student or an undergraduate competitor; you are now a model and authority figure, you are no longer a competitor, and you are first and foremost a graduate student. In the following discussion, each role change will be taken in turn and the practical effect of the change examined.

The first role change you will experience will come when you first meet the team, you will be viewed as an authority figure and will be looked to as a model of appropriate behavior. This is not bad per se., but its implications need to be realized. It is probably best to begin by being friendly, yet at the same time, reserved. You should use this introductory time as an opportunity to let the students get to know you as a person and for you to begin to earn their respect as a coach. Remember that it is probably easier to loosen up as time goes on than it is to become an authority figure at a later date. Be careful also to keep coaching decisions to yourself and not to share them with even "trusted" team members. Like it or not, you are now one of the people in charge, responsible for enforcing team rules, setting a model for team behavior, and maintaining a degree of professional distance. Remember that you will not be alone in these tasks.

The second role change is from competitor to coach (Chandler, 1987, P. 1). Four years of collegiate forensics competition should be enough for anyone. Your job now is to teach the skills of interpretation, public address, and/or limited preparation. Additionally, it is also your job to try to highlight the educational aspects of the activity as well as expectations for competition behavior. Your job is not however to live each student victory as if it were your own. A sense of accomplishment should come from your role in helping to guide a student to success from both an educational and a competitive standpoint. It should also come from watching them grow as individuals.

Remember that you cannot perform for your students so make sure that their accomplishments remain their own. If afterwards they thank you for your help, let this be your reward.

The last change in your role behavior involves being a graduate student. Be wary of becoming so involved with the team that you miss out on the very important social aspect of graduate school. Not all of your learning will occur in the classroom. It is relatively easy to stagnate socially if your entire circle of friends is comprised of the team you help to coach. Graduate school is about learning and socializing in a less structured environment. Making and promoting relationships with other graduate students can prove invaluable both at exam time and in job hunting.

#### COACHING

The final three pieces of advice concern your role as an individual events coach. They deal with open lines of communication, trusting your instincts, and remembering that a forensics assistantship is about learning and that you are not expected to have all the answers. I believe that all three are vital in producing a constructive coaching mind-set.

One of the most important pieces of advice is to communicate openly with the other graduate students and faculty that you will be coaching with. Then, once you have established solid lines of communication, work at keeping them open. Students often like to play coach against coach and your only defense is to trust and communicate with your colleagues. Do not let petty jealousies arise simply because one coach does not know what another coach is doing. The coaching staff should present themselves as a united front when addressing the team. Individually, each student should be able to pick and choose from the best advice that each coach has to offer.

The second piece of coaching advice is as simple as "trust yourself". Do not let yourself be intimidated by other coaches or even by some students. You have a point of view that is just as important and relevant as any other. Soon you will begin to develop your own coaching style and it will feel more and more comfortable as time goes on. Realize that a head coach usually wants the best for his/her team and if someone did not believe in your talent and ability, you would not be encouraged to coach.

A final piece of advice is to treat your assistantship as a learning experience. As Chessmaster Savielly Grigorievitch Tartakower once said, "The mistakes are all there waiting to be made." While you should not want to make mistakes, an occasional slip should be expected. Try to learn as much as you can from other coaches and from the varying perspectives that each of your students will bring to their events. This, in many ways, is the real joy of coaching.

#### CONCLUSION

Graduate school is a place to learn. It is a place to test your academic

ability as well as hone your coaching skills. It is a place to be challenged. Do not forget this Other coaches, as well as the graduate faculty, wish to see you succeed. Remember to be yourself and to set clear goals for your graduate education. Do not made the mistake of trying to please everyone. In the end, you have only yourself to answer to.

#### SOURCES CITED

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