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Carson S. Kay
Ohio University

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All Good and Well?:
The State of Forensic Health and Wellness Scholarship

Carson S. Kay – Ohio University

Carson S. Kay (M.A., Ohio University)

Carson S. Kay is a PhD student of Rhetoric and Public Culture in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. She holds over a decade of competitive public speaking experience and has coached collegiate forensics since 2016. Her research examines the interactions of race, space, and partisanship in contemporary political discourses. She holds an MA from Ohio University.

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Forensic educators and students face many competitive challenges while vying for trophies and titles. However, maintaining one’s health while preparing, traveling, and competing too often falls by the wayside. Although scholars have examined the health of forensic educators and students in the past, few current research agendas address the health concerns of the forensic community. With the exception of Carmack (2016) and her collaboration with Holm (2005, 2013, 2015), forensic scholars have not actively discussed how the activity affects student and educator wellbeing since 2004. Questions still remain regarding how the speech and debate community might feasibly promote a healthy lifestyle among its constituents. This exhaustive review examines the 58 published articles on forensic health-related topics to identify the human bodies addressed, methodological approaches utilized, and themes present. In doing so, this review reveals the gaps in forensic literature and suggests future research endeavors to reinvigorate scholarship and improve the wellbeing of participants within the speech and debate community.

Keywords: forensics, wellness, health communication, organizational initiatives

Wellness has long been deemed a critical component of organizational communication (Berlinguer, Falzi, & Figa-Talamanca, 1996; Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005; Real, 2010; Zoller, 2003a). Its benefits of mitigating member stress (Christiansen, 1999), coping with burnout (Omdahl & Fritz, 2006), and fostering a sense of belonging (Dailey & Zhu, 2017) and gratitude (Zoller, 2003a) within the organization have been documented in professional (e.g., Tracy, 2000; Zoller, 2003a) and academic (e.g., Boren, 2013; Rummell, 2015) contexts alike. The forensic community is no exception, addressing organizational sensemaking (Carmack, 2016) and concerns of relational (Schnoor & Green, 1989) and psychological tensions (Carmack & Holm, 2013; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992) faced by those engaged in the competitive field of speech and debate. Although forensic researchers have scrutinized the strains placed upon forensic directors, coaches, and educators (e.g., Burnett, 2002; Carmack & Holm, 2013; Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010; Dickmeyer, 2002; Gill, 1990; Leland, 2004; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Pettus & Danielson, 1994; Richardson, 2005; Wickelgren & Phillips, 2008), less work has probed the physical tensions of the speech and debate lifestyle on both the teacher and the student (e.g., Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992). The negative impacts of diet, insufficient exercise, and extraneous substances (i.e., tobacco and alcohol use) on forensic student wellness have been incorporated far too little in forensic literature (e.g., Leland, 2004; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992).
Apart from the occasional, individual submission to *Speaker & Gavel* (e.g., Carmack, 2016), the *National Forensic Journal* (e.g., Carmack & Holm, 2015), and the *Forensic* (e.g., Rogers & Rennels, 2008), few avenues have published health-focused forensic scholarship. In fact, the *National Forensic Journal* has not published a special issue on health and wellness since 2004 (see Alexander, 2004; Hatfield, 2004; Leland, 2004; Olson, 2004a, 2004b; Schnoor, 2004; Trejo, 2004; Workman, 2004), nor a review of forensic health communication scholarship. As such, an embodied research initiative is needed to determine what we know, what we do not know, and what measures we may take to provide answers and improve the wellness of both our educators and our students.

This need stems from two observations, the current states of American health and forensic wellness research. Current United States health trends spark the first concern. Many reports have elaborated upon current issues in American health, such as an increase in obesity (Hales, Carroll, Fryar, & Ogden, 2017; Ogden, Carroll, Fryar, & Flegal, 2015), chronic illness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017), and psychological stress (American Psychological Association, 2017; Bethune & Lewan, 2017; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012). According to a 2017 Centers for Disease Control report, nearly 40% (39.8%) of American adults struggle with obesity (Hales et al., 2017). Similarly, 16.1 million adults in the U.S. experienced “at least one major depressive episode that year” (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.), leading to approximately $210 billion spent on healthcare costs annually (Greenberg, 2015). Alternatively stated, Americans, as a whole, struggle to maintain physically and mentally healthy lifestyles.

Despite this concerning health climate in our country, forensic research on wellness has not, since the early 2000s, fully dissected the impact of the activity and related way of living on the physical health of its participants: educators and students. Currently, contemporary commentary — with the exception of Carmack and Holm (2015) and Carmack (2016) — is limited to introductory remarks, implications, and future research suggestions. Although psychological health has indeed been addressed from quantitative (e.g., Carmack & Holm, 2013, 2015) and qualitative (e.g., Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992) perspectives, the wear of the forensic lifestyle on coaches’ and students’ bodies has not been aggressively examined in forensic literature in over a decade. As forensic alumni have reported reflective concerns about the activity’s impact on health, this area of inquiry needs revisiting (Billings, 2011). Furthermore, forensic scholars have yet to synthesize speech and debate wellness research to identify areas in need of academic inquiry. Therefore, this expansive report reviews health communication contributions to forensic scholarship to identify gaps and advance forensic inquiry in two ways. The first objective is to summarize current forensic literature on health-related topics. Identifying trends will allow the sub-discipline to a) better comprehend the state of scholarship in forensic participant health and b) recognize gaps in need of evaluation. This latter intention leads to this review’s second objective: to spark inspiration for future research agendas in forensic arenas. This work will identify established findings and direct interest to unanswered questions.
Ultimately, it may function as a resource from which forensic scholars may draw direction for future projects.

My impetus for penning this review stems from my own past experience as a forensic competitor and present experience as a forensic coach. As a forensic student, my health was never my priority; my weight skyrocketed due to stress-eating, while my anxiety over my impending performance left me with prohibitory headaches and gastrointestinal upsets. I often presented with and through pain. Perhaps one might argue I inflicted such health implications upon myself. One would be right, for I chose to eat poorly, sleep little, and sacrifice my time at the gym for time in the team room. I do not deny that I, like many forensic students, made choices to improve my competitive potential at the expense of my physical and mental wellbeing. I do not intend to absolve the student from responsibility, but rather question whether the forensic community has adequately continued its academic response to the health challenges forensic competitors face. As a coach, I still fight these unhealthy tendencies and as I reflect upon my social interactions with current and past students, I feel ever the more strongly that re-examining the state of forensic health scholarship is vital to confirm what we know, what we do not know, and how we might construct new research agendas to better the wellbeing of our students and our educators. In the following review, I proceed in three sections. First, I explain my methodological process. Second, I provide general information by defining often-used terminology, presenting the bodies addressed in current scholarship, and identifying the methodological approaches used thus far in existing literature. Third, I identify predominant themes in both what we know and what we have yet to dissect. Specifically, I focus on themes arising in literature on educator health and student wellbeing. For each of these emphases, I identify the gaps present and suggest aspects that have yet to be answered. Finally, I elaborate upon these gaps and present potential research agendas for forensic inquiry into health and wellness initiatives.

Methods

To identify the methodological variation, current trends, and research gaps, I conducted a comprehensive search for pertinent articles published in forensic journals. Four journals contained health communication research on forensic topics: The National Forensic Journal (NFJ), Argumentation and Advocacy, The Forensic, and Speaker & Gavel. I identified relevant articles directly from the NFJ website, nationalforensicjournal.org, and I located the other outlets’ articles through Google Scholar and the EBSCOhost databases (i.e., ArticlesPlus, Communication and Mass Media Complete, and Communication Abstracts). Research arising from searches for “health,” “wellness,” “burnout,” “stress,” “obesity,” “smoking,” “diet,” “exercise,” and/or “exhaustion” in forensic contexts appears in this review. To ensure relevance to this project, I reviewed the abstracts of potential articles and removed those that did not emphasize

From the final 58 articles, distinct themes emerged regarding the voices addressed and content examined.
health topics and issues in the speech and debate community. After multiple intensive searches, 64 relevant articles made it into the final review sample. However, upon further examination of article content, I removed six more articles from the sample as they addressed argumentation in general rather than focusing on the forensic context. From the final 58 articles, distinct themes emerged regarding the voices addressed and content examined. To fully comprehend the research gaps, the articles’ acknowledgement of health-related issues (or lack thereof) must be addressed. Therefore, I identify the perspectives acknowledged, discuss the predominant themes researched within those perspectives, and note the gaps present.

**Terminology, Participants, and Past Methodologies**

However, before I delve into the sample themes, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of terminology that shall arise, as well as describe the participants present and the methodologies that other scholars have utilized to explore health-related topics in the forensic community.

**Terminology and Definitions**

Throughout this discussion, I incorporate four terms from workplace-focused organizational communication research. Therefore, it is prudent to understand these recurring terms: burnout, social support, co-rumination, and workplace health programs (WHPs).

First, burnout is essentially the state of emotional, psychological, and physical fatigue caused by one's occupation or workplace interactions. Typically, this state is comprised of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of — or cynicism directed at — others, and decreased sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1976, 1982; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In forensic literature, burnout primarily appears in discussions about director/coach/educator stamina and intent to leave the profession (Carmack & Holm, 2013; Gill, 1990; Richardson, 2005). Typically, the presence of burnout indicates an underlying organizational and/or relational tension in the individual's work life. As Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) emphasize, burnout is “a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (p. 399, emphasis added). Burnout occurs when workplace stressors become too much to bear.

The second term is social support, which refers to interactions, both potential and experienced, in which individuals feel a sense of belonging with and love from another person (Zimmerman & Applegate, 1994). Examples of social support include emotional support (Zimmerman & Applegate, 1994), resource support (Zimmerman & Applegate, 1994), and coach availability (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010). In forensic scholarship, social support predominantly manifests in team space interactions, such as in the team squad room (Carmack & Holm, 2005) and van (Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005). Social support is beneficial within organizations as it is often attributed as a means of coping with workplace stress (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Uchino, 2004). In short, this support can combat the factors that contribute to burnout.

However, social support’s positive effects are muted when the third term, co-rumination, is at play. Co-rumination refers to conversations in which two or more individuals engage in venting sessions (Rose, 2002). More specifically, co-ruminators may be found “frequently
discussing problems, discussing the same problem repeatedly, [mutually encouraging] discussing problems, speculating about problems, and focusing on negative feelings” (Rose, 2002, p. 1830). Sharing organizational concerns can be potentially beneficial, strengthening relationships between individuals. Nevertheless, when the negative talk leaves those involved feeling emotionally drained, any positivity that might arise from the social interaction is negated (Boren, 2013; Uchida & Yamasaki, 2008). In other words, co-rumination does not improve individuals’ moods; instead, it creates a negative environment (Boren, 2013). Forensic teams may see co-rumination arise in conversations identified by Rowe and Cronn-Mills (2005) as “van talk,” interactions in which students re-enter the backstage, take off the mask of tournament professionalism, and express competitive frustration (McNabb & Cabara, 2006). However, when these conversations dwell upon the negative, they may be doing more harm to forensic students than good.

In attempt to prevent burnout and co-rumination while fostering positive social support, organizations implement the fourth term, workplace health promotions or WHPs. WHPs attempt to meet the embodied needs of those who comprise the organization, including the need for exercise (Proper, Koning, van der Beek, Hildebrandt, Bosscher, & van Mechelen, 2003; Zoller, 2003b), nutrition courses (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005), and health screenings (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005). The programs also strive to create spaces for physical activity (i.e., gyms; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2016; Zoller, 2003b), psychological wellbeing resources (i.e., free, on-site, counseling services; meditation; and mental health resources; Benefits, 2014; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2016), and support for tobacco and alcohol cessation (Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2016). Additionally, whole-person WHPs seek to recognize, respect, and provide resources for physical, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing (Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2016). Some forensic literature proposes WHP-like ideology for tournament structure, suggesting that competitions acknowledge competitor and coach health (Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Olson, 2004a; Workman, 2004). Although time, cost, and participant pushback are all potential barriers to whole-person wellness initiatives (Geist-Martin, Horsley, & Farrell, 2003; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2016), “it is essential for organizations to consider a whole-person approach to their wellness campaigns for the success of the employees and of the organization as a whole” (Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2016, p. 182). As state and national forensic programs tend to identify as associations, they also hold responsibility for the wellbeing of their members.

**Bodies Addressed**

These members vary in age, stage of life, and experiences. As such, to simply address members is not enough. Rather, specific discussions of member types and their needs are necessary. Two kinds of members, in particular, currently manifest in preexisting forensic literature: forensic educators and forensic students.

**Forensic Directors/Assistant Directors/Coaches/Educators.** The most visible employees in forensic programs include (assistant) directors of forensics, coaches, and graduate assistants. We shall christen this group “forensic educators.” These individuals are, in essence,
perceived as the leaders of speech and debate programs. As such, they hold the responsibilities of guiding students in their events, registering for tournaments, and maintaining the team finances. However, these individuals wear many more hats in their programs. In addition to fulfilling the roles of coaches and administrators, they often act as counselors, drivers, problem-solvers, academic advisors, and nurturers (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010), identities that are not always in agreement. Due to these many roles, several scholars have identified forensic educators as the heads of their forensic family, the parental units of their teams (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010; White, 2005).

As such, the forensic educator’s role falls directly under the umbrella of emotion labor, in which the individual must balance real self and performed self while on the clock (Hochschild, 1983; Tracy, 2000). Consequently, the line between occupational and familial is often blurred, leaving forensic professionals to navigate relational tensions at work, at home, and for the graduate student, at school (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010; Colvert, 1997; Nelson, 2010; Outzen, 2016; Pettus & Danielson, 1994; Wickelgren & Phillips, 2008). In addition to psychological tensions regarding relationships, forensic educators face physical trials during their terms. They often drive long distances at late hours, frequently eat fast-food, have an irregular sleep cycle, and struggle to find time to regularly exercise (Dickmeyer, 2002; Gill, 1990, Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Richardson, 2005). Thus, these educators often navigate physical tribulations, such as obesity, nicotine addiction, and exhaustion. Working 16 hours a day, including weekends and late nights on campus, takes its toll on both mind and body (Carmack & Holm, 2013). Consequently, it is not surprising that forensic educators receive the most attention in forensic health literature. Their wellness is at risk.

**Student Competitors.** The second group of bodies is comprised of college student competitors. Although travel schedules differ depending on funding and interest, forensic team members are often on the road at least twice a month during the fall semester and even more frequently during the spring’s national competition season. For example, my own team travels to approximately eight competitions in the spring, two of which are each one week long. Furthermore, my team is not the exception; it is not uncommon for larger programs to travel even more frequently in both fall and spring semesters.

This travel schedule creates challenges similar to those that student athletes face. Speech team members have less time to study, fewer weekends to rest, and potentially less break time than non-competing college students. Nevertheless, forensic programs rarely receive the same supportive resources granted to athletic teams. For example, one large, midwestern university’s student-athlete handbook (Ohio University, 2017) details that student athletes will have access to tutors and study halls to help them navigate the challenges of a bustling travel schedule. In contrast, this same institution’s forensic team handbook (Ohio University, 2016) does not indicate that the university provides the same resources for speech team members. While forensic team members do not experience the same physical exhaustion athletes face, they are prone to mental exhaustion and, like student athletes, would benefit from academic resources to
help them balance their lives as competitors and as students. After all, if a forensic student wishes to be a successful competitor, s/he/they must both maintain his/her/their grade point average and perform well at tournaments.

Forensic competitors experience both academic and competitive stress on a regular basis. As stress has been found to depress the immune system’s tenacity (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004) and increase the potential for depression (van Praag, 2005), its presence in the forensic students’ lives has real, negative health implications. Therefore, some scholars have postulated ways to decrease student stress (e.g., Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992). However, little work has examined the causes (e.g., poor diet, lack of exercise, and addiction) and negative impacts (e.g., obesity) of the forensic lifestyle on the students’ bodies (e.g., Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992). Inquiry into the negative health trends these students face is overdue and just as significant as those faced by forensic educators. After all, with the exception of student-run teams, neither coach nor competitor exists without the other.

**Methodological Approaches in Forensic Wellness Scholarship**

Fortunately, some scholarship does exist with varying degrees of methodological diversity. The most dominant methodologies in health-related forensic research are surveys and reflective essays. Out of the 58 articles found on wellness-type topics in forensics, 14 employed a survey methodology in gathering and analyzing data (e.g. Billings, 2011; Carmack, 2016; Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006; Carmack & Holm, 2005, 2013, 2015; Hughes, Gring, & Williams, 2006; Gill, 1990; Kosloski, 1994; Littlefield, 1991; Littlefield & Larson-Casselton, 2004; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Rogers & Rennels, 2008; Swift, 2007; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001). More specifically, five studies incorporated quantitative survey methodology (e.g., Carmack & Holm, 2013, 2015; Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006; Gill, 1990; Rogers & Rennels, 2008), five employed qualitative questionnaires with open-ended questions (e.g., Carmack, 2016; Hughes, Gring, & Williams, 2006; Kosloski, 1994; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001), and four engaged in a mixed methods approach (e.g., Billings, 2011; Carmack & Holm, 2005; Littlefield & Larson-Casselton, 2004; Swift, 2007). By far, the most prominent body of survey research is Carmack and Holm’s (2005, 2013, 2015) work in team socialization, coach burnout, and social support of forensic educators.

Although most commonly used, survey methodology is not the only means by which forensic wellness issues are examined. In this literature review sample, I identified 20 reflective essays, including theoretical essays (e.g., Derryberry, 1995, 2005; Epping & Labrie, 2005; Friedley & Manchester, 2005; Orme, 2012; Richardson, 2005; Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005; Sellnow, 1994), state of the activity papers (e.g., Burnett, 2001; Dickmeyer, 2002; Gaer, 2002; Kirch, 2005; Leland, 2004; Olson, 2004a, 2004b; Preston, 1995; Schnoor, 2004; Trejo, 2004; White, 2005; Workman, 2004), and literature reviews (e.g., Hatfield, 2004; Littlefield, Sellnow, & Meister, 1994). Additionally, qualitative methods, such as interviews, historiographies, and rhetorical analyses, have been used to examine the negotiation of family and forensics (Wickelgren & Phillips, 2008), complaining culture (McNabb & Cabara, 2006), organizational
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progression (Swift, 2007), and gendered ballot commentary (Hobbs, Hobbs, & Paine, 2007). Furthermore, several (auto)ethnographic and performance pieces have examined tensions within speech and debate, such as first-year and/or graduate coach trials (Chouinard & Kuypers, 2010; Colvert, 1997; Nelson, 2010; Outzen, 2016), emotion labor (Gilstrap & Gilstrap, 2003), and general concerns about forensic wellness (Alexander, 2004; Miller, 2011). In short, while established forensic scholarship reflects methodological diversity, a continuation of multiple research perspectives will establish rich findings that will improve both student and educator health.

Themes Within the Literature

Just as forensic health scholarship still needs diverse methodological practices, forensic wellness research calls for inquiry into diverse health issues. By identifying the current themes in existing scholarship, I indicate not just the areas in need of deeper consideration, but the voices that have and have not been heard in forensic literature. The two voices of interest in this review are educators and students.

Educators

What We Know. The first voice of interest in forensic scholarship is that of the educator. Also known as director of forensics, assistant director of forensics, or simply coach, the forensic educator provides leadership for the team and is responsible for its functionality, funding, and performance. Because educators are part of the team’s core, their presence in the speech and debate community is critical. However, to be fully present requires a certain degree of personal wellness. As such, it is in the activity’s best interest to acknowledge the trials faced by educators and suggest means of improving educator wellness. Within the 12 articles focused on the forensic educator’s health, three main topics of discussion emerged: burnout, stress, and relational tension (see Appendix, Table 1).

Burnout. In the field of organizational communication, burnout has been broadly defined as “a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 399). While the concept can be simplified to “wearing out at work” (Maslach et al., 2001, as cited in Boren, 2013, p. 254), there is nothing simple about the impact of burnout on employee performance and wellbeing. Maslach et al. (2011) propose that burnout is a three-part concept comprised of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of personal accomplishment. These three components are more apt to affect individuals who regularly interact with clients, such as teachers working with students (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Considering that forensic educators often work long hours (Carmack & Holm, 2013; Richardson, 2005), it is unsurprising that these coaches become physically, emotionally, and psychologically exhausted from their occupation’s demands. This exhaustion may manifest as “intense reactions of anger, anxiety, restlessness, depression, tiredness, boredom, cynicism, guilt feelings, psychosomatic symptoms, and, in extreme cases, nervous breakdown” (Friedman, 1991, p. 325). Coaches may disengage and even resent their job due to an internal belief that they are
neither recognized nor supported by their institution nor their peers. Without social support, educators may be apt to trade in the team lifestyle for that of an assistant professor, lecturer, or in the case of the graduate student, teaching or research assistant.

**Stress.** Another area of inquiry revolves around forensic educator stress. Although burnout and stress could be perceived as synonymous descriptors of forensic educator exhaustion, “stress should not be equated with burnout” (Richardson, 2005, p. 108). Rather, stress contributes to burnout (Richardson, 2005) and can arise from a variety of sources. Preston (1995) explains that burnout can be sparked by pay and funding, recruitment, pressure to publish research while coaching winning teams, season length, and lack of support for forensics. Indeed, these financial, social, and occupational expectations and tensions can easily overwhelm the forensic educator, causing him/her/them to feel underappreciated, overworked, and unwanted by his/her/their department and/or institution.

Furthermore, this stress impacts more than one’s sense of accomplishment, self-worth, and self-potential. The need to educate, to win, to please the department, and to fight for funding all at once can have a catastrophic impact on the forensic educator’s body. As the Mayo Clinic (2016) explains, the human body does not differentiate between occupational and survival stressors; it perceives the everyday stress of the forensic lifestyle just as it would perceive a panther poised to pounce. Thus, when the forensic educator faces a chronic stressor, part of his/her/their brain sends the panic alarm to the kidney’s adrenal glands, which secrete high concentrations of cortisol. This hormone inhibits body systems like the immune system (Mayo Clinic, 2016) so the educator has more energy to fight or flee. This process is only supposed to be temporarily triggered, allowing the body to return to homeostasis after the threat is neutralized. However, when the stressors persist, the body maintains this fight-or-flight state of being. Consequently, the human body continues to secrete cortisol and will become more vulnerable to health conditions, including “anxiety, depression, digestive problems, headaches, heart disease, sleep problems, weight gain, [and/or] memory and concentration impairment” (Mayo Clinic, 2016, para. 9). Simply stated, the stress a forensic educator frequently feels may cause significant physical and psychological harm (Carmack & Holm, 2013; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992). Over time, these stressors will just continue to smolder.

**Relational Tension.** Burnout and stress both play significant roles in the forensic educator’s life. Another tension just as pertinent is the relational struggles forensic educators face with their families. The travel requirements of the job often keep coaches away from their families. Speech and debate is a unique field “in that the travel and time demands of the activity are different from the demands of a ‘regular’ faculty member or a typical nine-to-five job” (Pettus & Danielson, 1994, p. 48). Essentially, those who invest in the coaching career must balance forensic educator and parent identities and expectations. Dual coach-mothers express that they feel guilt after spending time away from their family. Mothers who coach “felt that they had to choose between extensive coaching and spending time at home — a perpetual dilemma which causes a great deal of stress” (Pettus & Danielson, 1994, p. 50). The mother who coaches...
is basically caught in a double-bind of her dual role, for to mother is to take time away from her forensic family, yet to coach is to keep her from her own family.

Nevertheless, mothers are not the only forensic educators affected by this separation from family. Forensic educators will, at multiple points in their career, have to sacrifice time with family to prepare and travel with their teams (Jensen & Jensen, 2007b; Williams, McGee, & Worth, 2001). This is not just because of the time required to prepare, travel, and chaperone, but because of organizational norms, expectations, and insufficient support. Wickelgren and Phillips (2008) provide perhaps the clearest explanation, stating

Awareness of work and family roles and the hegemony that creates and maintains these roles is important for redefining the intersection between work and family. We entered this study expecting to find that forensics coaches were under tremendous pressure to place forensics at the top of their priorities and that work and family were incompatible. For the most part this is what we found. (p. 92)

Undeniably, exceptions exist. For years, forensic educators have coached teams and raised families simultaneously. One could argue that these educators know the lifestyle when they sign their contracts and enter into the speech and debate community and thus have exempted their right to vocalize dissatisfaction over relational tensions and occupational stressors that consequently arise. Nevertheless, just because someone signs a document does not mean the organization is not responsible for maintaining a quality workplace experience and promoting healthy and achievable expectations for its members. Organizational hegemony is ingrained, yet the messages and initiatives it projects can be modified to ensure speech associations illustrate that a) they care for the wellbeing of involved members and b) they are committed to decreasing forensic educator burnout.

**What We Don’t Know.** Thus far in the literature on forensic educator wellness, scholars have focused on burnout, stress, and relational tensions coaches weather during the course of their careers. However, two significant gaps exist in the overarching research agenda: first, the financial tension between food and funding and second, the management of chronic health conditions while traveling (see Appendix, Table 2).

**Food and Funding.** A common complaint in forensic literature is the poor nutrition coaches consume during tournament weekends (Carmack & Holm, 2013). Often, fast food becomes the staple of the forensic diet due, in part, to its sheer ease. However, accessibility is not the only reason forensic educators fill their plates with greasy, fried goods. Many cannot afford healthier alternatives. A concern spanning years of forensic research is that of budgetary restriction and management (Kirch, 2005). Indeed, models have been proposed to navigate this challenging terrain (see Kirch, 2005), as have recommendations for maintaining quality relationships with university administration (Cunningham, 2005). A persistent concern among forensic educators is the stark reality of program defunding, which spurs educators to prove the value of their program to university administration. However, prior inquiry indicates that programs fold not because the administration fails to see the significance of speech and debate.
Rather, programs liquidize because of insufficient funding to support the team (Littlefield, 1991). Still, forensic educators strive to illustrate how speech and debate programs provide experiential education for students (Sellnow, 1994) in an attempt to maintain what funding they have. With this monetary concern in mind, forensic educators often opt for a cheaper diet when using the university’s money to emphasize the program’s financial conscientiousness. Essentially, educators pay the health price of fast food to afford the entry fees and keep the team afloat.

Although this health-budget tension is common knowledge to those who coach in the speech and debate community, little research has recently examined the relationship between program budget and health of the forensic educator, nor the personal perspectives regarding coach diet and overall wellbeing. Contemporary research is needed to contribute to previously established lines of coach health inquiry, as well as provide new insight into the logic of eating cheaply.

**Chronic Health Conditions and Travel.** An additional line of research that forensic scholars have yet to dissect is the forensic educator’s management of chronic health conditions during travel. As previously mentioned, the stressful lifestyle of speech and debate can trigger many significant health concerns, including depression and anxiety, heart disease, and gastrointestinal upsets (Mayo Clinic, 2016). Furthermore, far more health issues unrelated to stress may manifest in a person’s life. Despite these health tensions, however, forensic educators must spend many hours on the road and out of town. Consequently, coaches with underlying chronic health conditions — like diabetes, asthma, and arthritis — may face situations in which their health should be prioritized, but is brushed aside due to the demands of the forensic activity. Thus, academic inquiry is greatly needed to contemplate the challenges coaches with chronic illnesses face, examine the ways in which they have handled these tensions, and consider how speech and debate organizations might support these individuals as they navigate the dual needs of supporting the team and caring for themselves.

**Students**

Nevertheless, while inquiry of forensic educator wellness is critical to the team’s ability to function, forensic educators are largely outnumbered by those who compete. Namely, forensic students also warrant scholarship. Although addressed less than educators, the student population has entered the conversation.

**What We Know.** Also known as the competitor or participant, the student is a critical component of the team. Indeed, without students, teams would not exist. If the educator is the heart, the student is everything else. Nevertheless, research on the student is primarily limited to student performance, both in general terms (e.g., Gaer, 2002; Olson, 2010) and gendered concerns (e.g., Croucher, Thornton, & Eckstein, 2006; Furgerson & Rudnick, 2014; Dhillon & Larson, 2011; Donovan, 2012; Manchester & Friedley, 2003; White, 1997). Fewer studies have examined student health issues (e.g., Hatfield, 2004; Kosloski, 1994; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; Olson, 2004b; Trejo, 2004). Thus, the speech and debate community is greatly in need of
not only research on coach wellness, but on student health, as well (see Appendix, Tables 1 and 2).

**Stress.** Like educators, forensic students are exposed to highly stressful scenarios on a regular basis. Some stress may be partially attributed to communication apprehension, also known as speech anxiety (Littlefield, Sellnow, & Meister, 1994). However, much stress stems from environmental factors. Forensic students may fret that their access to food and water, sleep deprivation, rushed tournament schedule, and inability to exercise will influence their performances (Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992). Indeed, the first issue is of particular concern. The degree to which the team covers students’ food costs differs between universities and is largely dependent upon the budget of the program. Some schools give each student a small stipend for the entirety of the tournament. Others fully cover the cost of meals. However, even universities who pay for student meals often cap the amount a student may spend. Thus, some students must supplement their meal costs. In more severe cases, students must fend for themselves during tournaments. One forensic educator observed students gathering pecans from a tree because they did not have access to food during the tournament (Trejo, 2004). Although this is an extreme anecdote, the reality remains that students wish to focus on their events, but additional, justified worries often distract them from giving their best performances. Hunger, thirst, and exhaustion do not help students reach their final round goals. While students may engage in routines to decrease stress caused by communication apprehension, they often are at the mercy of environmental factors when it comes to food-related anxiety.

**Relational Tensions.** Environmental stress is a significant struggle for the forensic student, but relational tensions are just as prominent. More specifically, interaction with family members — or lack thereof — is a matter addressed in forensic literature. Part of this tension comes from family pressure (Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992), both perceived and real. However, much strife arises from time spent traveling. Simply stated, students spend about 75% of their academic year preparing and performing away from family (Jensen & Jensen, 2007b). On the macro-level, students sacrifice much of their year to become better communicators and earn additional accolades. The same can be said for the micro-level, as well. Weekends are not sacred family time for forensic competitors, nor are holidays. As Jensen and Jensen (2007b) note, “it is not unusual for participants to choose between sharing holidays with family or forensic colleagues” (p. 19). Becoming a champion requires one to make sacrifices, including time spent relaxing with one’s family. Although this sacrifice is ultimately a student’s choice, that does not mean such a lifestyle is easy.

This area of contention — dwindling interaction with family — is an area in need of additional inquiry. Williams and Hughes (2003) state,

. . . intuitively, we suspect that student satisfaction among forensic students increases as their family communication increases. Our contention is that forensic students will have greater overall student satisfaction if forensics (and other activities) do not excessively impede communication with family members. (p. 35)
Separation from family can cause students stress, so further research is needed to identify possible ways of establishing a stronger balance between forensics and family (Jensen & Jensen, 2007b). Coach suggestions for increased communication — like encouraging parents to send care packages, inviting parents to forensic events, and reminding students to keep their families informed of their performances — have been proposed (Williams & Hughes, 2003). Furthermore, educators have been urged to interact directly with family members, including making phone calls, sending emails, and distributing newsletters with information about the team’s successes and endeavors (Williams & Hughes, 2003). Although such engagement does not compensate for lost time, it does keep a channel of communication open between students’ and families’ lives. Suggestions like these could benefit the students’ sense of connection with their families. However, as the dates of these studies illustrate, forensic scholarship is long overdue for inquiry into navigating the family-forensic dialectic in an era of communicative technological advances.

**Team Identification.** The third area of known scholarship focuses on team identification. Forensic researchers have examined means of socializing teams and fostering a sense of camaraderie, shared group identity, and tradition (e.g., Carmack & Holm, 2005; Derryberry, 2005; Friedley & Manchester, 2005; Jensen & Jensen, 2007a; Orme, 2012; Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005). Indeed, team identification can ultimately motivate (Derryberry, 1995). Overarching social support is beneficial for the forensic student, but when negative interactions arise, time spent with teammates becomes another source of stress. This stress may stem from struggles with team cohesion (Miller, 2011) and/or verbal abuse within the team family, such as unrelenting criticism and trivialization (Hobbs, Hobbs, Veuleman, & Redding, 2003). Team members may verbally pressure others to conform to team norms because they wish to protect the team image, ensure the journey toward the team goal is not slowed, and/or avoid deviant behavior that makes team members feel uncomfortable (Clark, 1979). Unfortunately, the effects of peer rejection are strongly related to depression (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Rudolph, Hammen, & Burge, 1994), meaning that team rejections of deviant behavior may deleteriously impact the targeted members’ mental wellbeing. As Kopala-Sibley et al. (2013) explain,

> When children are left out of activities by friends or are explicitly told they will be liked only if they act a certain way (i.e., are relationally victimized), they may believe that this is due to some fault with them that may be corrected. They may then try to alter their behaviour in the belief that altering one’s behaviour can garner social status, which may ultimately lead to the development of feelings of inadequacy following setbacks, and the belief that altering one's behaviour may correct this. (p. 45)

Although collegiate forensic competitors are not children, they too may be negatively impacted when peers reject ideas and behavior that deviate from expectations. As simple a phrase as “you did what?” (Epping & Labrie, 2005, p. 18) may contribute to the member’s sense of belonging and self-esteem.
All Good and Well?

Just as peer rejection may contribute to negative mental health outcomes, stress may also stem from identification with the team itself. After all, if students’ self-concepts become so intertwined in the group identity that they must negate their own personal boundaries to fit into the group dynamic, such as by self-disclosing more personal information than they so desire, they have “relinquished a portion of [their] own identit[ies] to mesh with the rest of [their] team” (Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005, p. 104). Furthermore, high identification with a peer group prone to risky behavior (i.e., tobacco use) tends to direct members to engage in that behavior (Fuqua et al., 2012). The strong sense of team identity and belonging is, by no means, an innately negative phenomenon. However, with it comes the potential for peer pressure to manifest, even indirectly, and contribute to students feeling pressured to adhere to group behaviors, such as complaining (McNabb & Cabara, 2006) and engaging in traditions (Rowe & Cronn-Mills, 2005). Consequently, students may feel a sense of lost self, a sense of inauthenticity when on the road. By becoming one with the team, they lose sight of who they are as individuals.

Although this primary research on group identity and team cohesion has greatly contributed to the community’s understanding of team identity development, additional research is needed to examine, sadly, the darker side of team identity that impacts the students’ social and psychological wellbeing. For example, inquiry into the tension arising from social media conversations — often out of the forensic educator’s sight — that demean, bully, and/or harass other students is greatly needed in the field to help forensic educators form team policies and protect students from deleterious online interactions that might tarnish their speech and debate experience.

What We Don’t Know. Ultimately, forensic literature on student wellbeing is lacking. Although I have mentioned several research gaps already, there are two predominant areas in need of elaboration. Future research needs to address first, the challenges faced by differently-abled and chronically ill students and second, current trends in obesity and tobacco use (see Appendix, Table 2).

Differently-Abled and Chronically Ill Students. Despite heralding the forensic community’s mission for social justice and inclusivity, forensic research has yet to fully examine the challenges faced by differently-abled and/or chronically ill students competing in speech and debate. On a functional, practical level, tournaments are typically accommodating of the needs of such students and want to ensure they have a positive experience. However, little theoretical work has examined the limitations these students face on the bus, in the hotel, and during the tournament. Only two articles in this sample explicitly focus on differently-abled forensic students (e.g., Einerson, 1971; Kosloski, 1994). Considering the rise of chronic illness in the United States, scholarly conversations about policy and practice are needed in forensic literature to ensure all students have access to a positive tournament experience.
Obesity and Tobacco Use. Similarly, the lack of research on student struggles with obesity and tobacco use is also of considerable concern. The last time a research team explicitly discussed forensic student obesity was in the early 1990s (e.g., Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992). While references to weight and substance use occasionally grace the pages of forensic articles on general wellness, little scholarship addresses the physical state of our forensic students today. From casual observation as a forensic educator, I have noticed many students struggle with weight gain by their junior year of competition. As a former competitor, I can say that I am still battling the pounds I accrued during my competition days. Furthermore, obesity is not the only concern. Tobacco use is also a topic the forensic community must begin to address. I rarely attend a tournament without seeing at least one group of students smoking along the sidewalks. Nevertheless, my word is simply not enough. Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to identify the trends in obesity and tobacco use among forensic students, hear the narratives of those struggling with addiction and weight gain, and outline organizational means of supporting students in improving their wellbeing. As medical knowledge and nation-wide trends in health continue to evolve, the forensic community must keep up with the wellness times to ensure the survival of its students and itself.

Future Research

The forensic world has begun the journey in protecting educator and student wellbeing, but the trek is far from complete. There are many potential research agendas in need of elaboration — and initiation — to determine best practices for forensic participants, programs, and organizations. These agendas include academic and financial student stress, team co-rumination, student burnout, forensic whole-person WHPs, differently-abled and/or chronically ill student challenges, obesity and tobacco trends in the forensic community, financial tension between food and funding, the management of chronic health conditions while traveling, family-forensic dialectic and technology, and the dark side of team identity online (see Appendix, Table 2). I present these agendas based on the most significant gaps I identified in the preexisting literature. Furthermore, as a forensic educator, I have unfortunately individually witnessed situations that fall into each of these categories. By conducting research about these concerns, scholars may discover data to support anecdotal evidence and spur organizational initiatives.

The first area in need of inquiry pertains to the student. Seven agendas, in particular, warrant further scrutiny. First, students, like educators, experience forensic burnout. Identifying the causes of forensic student burnout could provide programs and organizations invaluable information to mitigate tensions and properly address the emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and/or feelings of insufficient accomplishment that impact the students’ experience. Second, like burnout, health is often tied to secondary stressors, such as academic performance and college finances. These two stressors are largely ignored in forensic research and should be examined to understand the students’ struggle to balance speech and school time, as well as living and forensic expenses. After all, suits do not pay for themselves, nor their dry-cleaning. Third, although related to the well-examined concept of stress, co-rumination is a fairly recent research
agenda in the field of communication studies. It would behove forensic scholars to incorporate this concept into their scholarly inquiries to improve the psychological and social wellbeing of students. Fourth, the experiences and challenges faced by differently-abled and/or chronically ill forensic students demand acknowledgement. Only two research articles focus on these competitors, making them perhaps the most overlooked population in forensic literature. To truly embrace inclusivity, the activity should listen to these students and propose policy for improving their experiences. Fifth, forensic scholars should also evaluate the wellness trends of students, especially trends that are of current concern nationwide (i.e., smoking and obesity) to determine where we are lacking most. Sixth, technology has significantly changed since the 1990s and early 2000s. As such, studies examining how forensic students navigate the tension between forensic success and family participation through online media would provide current context to the conversation of balancing team and home. Seventh, the dark side of technology, such as negative social media communication between team members, deserves consideration, as well. The dark side of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is of significant interest in the field of communication studies today, so incorporating this literature into a forensic context could grant educators insight into handling online tensions between team members.

Without question, more research on the student experience is needed in the forensic world. Less literature focuses on student health than educator health. Nevertheless, despite the breadth of research on forensic educators, deeper inquiry is still needed. Obesity and tobacco usage trends, financial tension between diet and budget, and management of chronic health conditions all warrant further research to provide evidence and advocate for wellness changes in speech and debate organizations. Coaches are often the folks who have the wheel, the judging pen, and students’ backs, so their wellbeing is truly of the utmost importance.

Finally, forensic organizations must begin to consider whole-person WHPs to protect their students and their educators. Fortunately, this component of the forensic community has not gone unacknowledged. In 1997, the American Forensic Association presented a set of NIET wellness initiatives for that year’s individual events tournament (AFA, 1991). Furthermore, forensic scholars presented a set of four wellness recommendations at the First Developmental Conference on Individual Events based on the findings of Hatfield, Hatfield, and Carver’s (1989) study. The Tournament Management Practice Division recommended 1) “to create a shared vision of what a tournament experience should include for healthy competition,” 2) “to enhance awareness of the stressful nature of forensic tournaments and provide guidance through information for stress reduction and management,” 3) “to provide information to the forensic community on the wellness approach to forensics by having all national organizations promote programs on that orientation,” and 4) “to encourage tournament hosts to analyze and meet the need of the forensic community even if it places more demands on the host” (Hatfield, Hatfield, & Carver, 1989, p. 32). However,
recommendations are but empty words without active initiative. Thus far, very few of these suggestions have been put into practice. As Carmack (2016) reflects, AFA and NFA qualification requirements can conflict with healthy tournament praxis. Too often, students sacrifice wellness on their journey for a spot at the national table. Therefore, contemporary forensic scholars must begin the publication push to encourage forensic organizations to act upon these previously established best practices and ensure we truly practice what we so often preach.

**Conclusion**

Coaches and students should never have to brush their health aside to pursue their passion. Health should be a recognized right and be supported by both speech organizations and individual programs. After refreshing our forensic knowledge of general information and terminology, the bodies addressed in forensic literature, and utilized methodologies; identifying themes to establish areas in need of further examination; and presenting future research agendas for forensic scholars, this paper granted a stronger conceptualization of the areas in which health-related forensic scholarship and practices must improve. Health conversations may have started in the forensic community, but these conversations must not be left in the early 2000s. Just as students approach their persuasive speeches should forensic scholars address these gaps and anecdotal concerns. Scholars must solidify both the problems and causes of wellness issues in the activity, propose achievable solutions on the organizational and team levels, and advocate for the activity to enact these initiatives so that students and educators may personally benefit. Carmack (2016) notes the paradox of students calling for healthy choices in their rounds, only to walk out the door to the embrace of a cigarette, the smell of poor quality food, or the absence of sustenance entirely. It is all good and well to articulate a call to action and even better to write in response. However, I urge you, fellow educators, to write with the intent to apply. Write with the intent to enact. Write until we are well.
All Good and Well?

References


All Good and Well?


All Good and Well?


All Good and Well?


## Table 1: Themes Within the Literature

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* Forensic Educator includes (Assistant) Directors of Forensics, Specialized Coaches, and Graduate Assistants.
Table 2: Agendas in Need of Further Inquiry

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