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# EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF AN OPEN DOOR POLICY AND A MINDFULNESS ROOM AT THE INTERCOLLEGIATE SPEECH (INDIVIDUAL EVENTS) TOURNAMENT

C. Austin McDonald II and Samantha Burke



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# Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy and a Mindfulness Room at the Intercollegiate Speech (Individual Events) Tournament

C. Austin McDonald II and Samantha Burke

## Abstract

*Two distinct tournament features were offered at a regional intercollegiate individual events swing: 1.) an open door policy for all competition rounds and 2.) a mindfulness room for students. A 16-item survey (with both qualitative and quantitative prompts) was administered at the conclusion of the swing to gain a sense of participants' perceptions of past tournament experiences and experiences with the newly implemented features. Seventy-one (n=71) respondents participated (competitors, coaches, tournament staff, and hired judges). Analysis of the data revealed: 40% of participants had felt the need to leave a round in the past (a disproportionate 80% of which were women, nonbinary, or genderqueer), a clear quantitative increase in perceived confidence that competitors felt to leave the room as needed after the reading of the open door policy, judges and students had divergent perceptions on the effectiveness of the open door policy, and while the mindfulness room concept was praised, the main criticisms were the size and levels of accessibility to the room. The authors offer suggestions for administering an open door policy and a mindfulness room in a forensics context.*

*Keywords: forensics, open door policy, mindfulness room, speech tournament, individual events*

The 2018 National Communication Association Convention featured multiple forensics panels concerning trigger or content warnings for individual events tournaments. How do competitors and judges manage self-care practices in formalized contexts (like a competition)? How do we provide productive challenges for students while avoiding potentially (re)traumatizing experiences? Forensics (speech and debate) is not an inherently traumatizing activity. The structures of the activity invite public discussion of contemporary issues—many of which may be very difficult to process as a viewer, especially recently. “At the time of publishing, one indisputable trend across all forensic categories is the inclusion of trauma within the performance. . . . Movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #IEToo permeate speech rounds” (Walker & Samens, 2020, p. 23). With exposure to several rounds of performances addressing topics like sexual assault, suicide, and hate-based violence, competitors and judges experience emotional exhaustion (Ward, 2018), triggerings (Walker & Samens,

2020), or overstimulation (Soibelman et al., 2020). Sometimes tournament participants need, for lack of a better word, a rest.

Yet, the “unwritten rules” of forensics suggest one should remain in the performance space for the entirety of the round, or at least ask for permission to leave the round (Paine, 2005). Still, students (Soibelman et al., 2020; Ward, 2018) and judges (Walker & Samens, 2020) who participate in individual events occasionally feel the need to leave rounds to practice self-care. Norms suggest if one *really* needs a break, there are few spaces where one could go such as a stall in a less-frequented restroom location: “At tournaments, I hid in corridors, empty classrooms, and bathroom stalls across the country to cope with overstimulation” (Soibelman et al., 2020, p. 126). Are these really the practices we want to uphold? The conversations at the 2018 NCA Convention, as well as the newly-implemented open door policy and “quiet room” at the 2019 National Forensic Association national tournament, suggest we are ready to reevaluate our norms. Still, by all appearances, no research has been published regarding an open door policy or a mindfulness room in a forensics context. Dr. Nicole Freeman, the NFA 2019 Research Committee Chair, noted in a personal correspondence:

No official research was conducted regarding the NFA’s newly adopted open door policy (and use of a quiet room) at the 2019 National Forensics Championship Tournament. Since this was the first year implementing the policy, we approached it similarly to a pilot year; expecting that some edits would likely need to occur after we saw how it functioned in practice. I think this coming year would be an excellent time to conduct formal research on the policy and practice, however. (N. Freeman, personal communication, July 18, 2019)

COVID-19, however, compromised the 2020 nationals season, resulting in alternative (online) venues for forensic performances and outright cancellations of all in-person national intercollegiate speech tournaments. Without collected data, we do not know the full extent of the efficacy of these features. Because forensics has been recognized as a co-curricular activity (Ehninger, 1952; Littlefield et al., 2001), an extension of the classroom, a reevaluation of tournament wellness practices could assist forensics educators in refining these new tournament features.

We surveyed participants in Fall 2018 at a regular-season regional individual events swing (two tournaments in one weekend) which offered two distinct features: 1.) an “open door” policy for all competition rounds and 2.) a mindfulness room. Since students have not only needed a structure to allow abstention from viewing potentially upsetting performances, but also a designated place of refuge, these two features were billed as a complementary set. As one respondent noted: “Every tournament should have [mindfulness rooms]. I have had to decompress in echoey cold stairwells before...NOT as helpful! This was awesome!” The results of this study suggest students benefit from both the open door policy and the mindfulness room in notable ways that warrant further inquiry.

## Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy

Previous scholarship on how competitors manage potentially stressful situations in tournaments is limited. Conferences panels are not much different. The 2018 NCA conversations about trigger and content warnings seemed hindered by their lack of evidence beyond fractured, informal (auto)ethnographies. Discussions were often relegated to anecdotal firsthand experiences or observations as a previous competitor, coach, judge, tournament director, or educator. In short, conversations devolved into *presumptions* about the phenomena taking place at forensics tournaments (the student experiences) while rarely *including* undergraduates in such paper or panel discussions. Scholars often *speculated* on the possible modes of action without knowing fully the latent problems students encounter at a typical speech tournament. Holm (2017) noted the forensics community, especially, for having “. . . good presentations at NCA but then [we] rarely see those NCA papers and panels developed into something more permanent and accessible to our discipline” (p. 59). To avoid what Cronn-Mills and Croucher (2013) referred to as a “carousel effect” with forensics conference presentations, we offer the results of this study to assist conversations beyond the anecdotal and to encourage further research to a clearly pressing set of issues in the forensics community.

Our tournament structures deserve further consideration. One of the researchers (of this study) recently judged a mid-season national warm-up tournament outround in which “CW: sexual assault” was written on the board. When it was time for that speaker to perform, the

Is there a way we can normalize exiting rounds for legitimate reasons?”

outround chair noted the presence of the content warning and suggested that if anyone wanted to leave before the performance began, “now is a good time.” Instances like these have benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, someone who may negatively experience such material

has a clear opportunity to leave the space without experiencing potential distress. On the other hand, this structure clearly singles out anyone willing to disclose their varying levels of discomfort with a particular concept or subject matter. Is there a way we can normalize exiting rounds for legitimate reasons?

To answer this quandary, we partnered with the two host schools of a regional swing to implement an open door policy for competition rounds and a mindfulness room for student use. Descriptions of the open door policy and the mindfulness room as new features of the tournament were provided in a “points of information” email to attending schools days before the swing occurred. Directors had the opportunity to disseminate this information to their coaches and competitors as they saw fit.

We composed a set of survey questions directly in relation to the open door policy and the mindfulness room to gain a sense of how such changes impacted the tournament experience for its participants. This inquiry was guided by several questions:

**RQ1:** How many participants have experienced a tournament round in which they felt compelled to leave?

**RQ2:** Do judges and competitors experience competition rounds differently?

**RQ3:** Does the reading of the open door policy change the experience of the round?

**RQ4:** Are participants' perceptions more likely to change with the increased exposure to the oral reading of the open door policy?

**RQ5:** Should tournaments feature a mindfulness room (distinct from a student lounge)?

The purpose of this essay is to provide findings from our collected data to inform conversations and policy-making regarding future intercollegiate forensics tournaments. Throughout this essay, when we refer to forensics, we mean individual events as they are generally conceptualized by organizations like AFA, NFA, PKD, and PRP<sup>1</sup>, respectively. To clarify, this particular discussion focuses on experiences at individual event tournaments specifically. The host schools of this particular swing regularly attend the AFA National Speech Tournament. Throughout this article, we use the term “tournament participants” to refer to anyone interacting with the tournament, which may include (but not be limited to): competitors, coaches, judges, tournament directors, tournament staff, and observers.

We first offer a review of literature addressing relevant themes related to the study. Second, we explain the method of the study (such as design and procedures). Third, we detail the results with points of discussion. Finally, we acknowledge limitations and directions for future research.

## Review of Literature

Two primary themes emerging from previous literature are tournament norms and wellness in forensics. Prevailing notions of tournament administration (putting one together, running it) and of tournament practices (participants' behavioral expectations) are a matter of cultural conception. What is considered acceptable at a tournament is negotiated between tournament host, participants, and regional/national sensibilities. The tournament is a site in which cultural norms are continually upheld, reevaluated, and to a lesser extent, challenged.

Perhaps one reason why tournament practices seem “stuck” in their recursive habits is emulation. As Freeman, Rogers, and Hopkins (2017) note, due to frequent lack of formal training, younger coaches (and tournament directors) have a tendency to emulate what they have observed in their own coaches' behaviors. With recent scrutiny of unethical and abusive practices from former forensics coaches (Kitchener, 2019), younger coaches simply emulating what they have observed is unacceptable. Further, younger directors may be overloaded with

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<sup>1</sup> American Forensic Association, National Forensic Association, Pi Kappa Delta, and Phi Rho Pi

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meeting the basic expectations of a tournament (which is a feat in itself) to even consider which structures deserve modification.

Tournament norms are upheld through what Paine (2005) distinguishes as rules and norms:

*Rules* are often formal and explicit whereas *norms* tend to be informal and implicit. Rules may be enacted at a particular moment by an official governing body, while norms are habits or patterns which evolve over time among the members of a community. (pp. 79-80, our emphasis)

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What if we could change a norm through explicating a new policy or “rule”? This seemed to be the idea behind the features offered at the 2019 NFA tournament. One particular norm that intersects with the open door policy is:

the way we enter rooms (“wait quietly outside the door if the round is already in progress and only walk in when you’re absolutely sure nobody is speaking”), [and] the way we leave rooms (“ask the judge’s permission to leave if you depart mid-round to get to another event, but don’t wave and shout ‘good luck’ to the other contestants”). (Paine, 2005, p. 81)

Clearly, some norms have changed. Paine (2005) also notes that sensibilities with these norms not only vary among individual competitors, coaches, and judges, but also vary by region. Because these are *embodied practices*, norms vary from tournament to tournament. “But in the choice between chaos and clarity, the unspoken rules provide functional directions” (Paine, 2005, p. 81). Since competitors are the most vulnerable population at a tournament, who wrestle with decision-making that takes into account the competing expectations of self, peers, coach, judge, tournament director, and forensics culture at large, it is no surprise that students resort to the well-established norms of their respective contexts. Put simply, students are structurally encouraged to set aside their personal needs to meet cultural expectations.

Paine (2005) also acknowledges unwritten rules regarding in-round behaviors, such as being “good audiences” and avoiding undesired behaviors such as:

. . . memorizing [one’s] own speech, painting [one’s] nails, staring out the window, or even taking a nap . . . There is no “written rule” to force students to politely pay attention to each other, but the operation of unwritten norms helps to ensure that student performers are minimally likely to be “thrown off” by deliberately rude or callously indifferent auditors. (p. 82)

These particular norms may be the closest to highlighting student apprehensions regarding the focus of this study--leaving a competition round for personal reasons. Aside from Ward’s (2018) work on competitor burnout, forensics scholarship rarely (if ever) acknowledges that students have legitimate reasons for leaving competition rounds. As students, judges, and coaches tend to restore familiar tournament behaviors, discussion may only acknowledge competitors as they

intersect with the functions of the competition, such as asking judges for permission to leave the round, usually under the assumption of one going to another competition round. From all appearances, students' needs to leave competition rounds for personal reasons are simply ignored.

Only until recently (during revision of this article) more fruitful research was finally published. Walker and Samens (2020) primarily focus on trauma, specifically judges' experiences of being triggered when judging a round. Norms played a significant role:

Over half of the participants (67%, n=32) commented on how forensic tournament norms impacted how they experienced traumas at tournaments. Noted tournament norms included completing judge responsibilities, following tournament etiquette, the need to deprioritize individual needs, and topic and performance trends. (p. 29)

Judges, too, feel constrained by the norms of the activity, often subjecting themselves to potentially triggering experiences--even when they supposedly have the (perhaps unpopular) ability to pause between performances and take a break. Respondents of their study also noted subject matter of performances to be triggering, as well as the personal lived experiences of the judges being comparable to the performances in the round (Walker & Samens, 2020, p. 29). Competitors are not the only tournament participants who feel "trapped" by their responsibilities (Walker & Samens, 2020, p. 29). This work signals that trauma has not only become a norm in forensic performance subject matter, but *experiencing* trauma (and its coping strategies) appear to have unduly become silent, undesired norms of the tournament experience. New tournament structures are needed to abate these norms.

Aside from trauma as a lens to understand experiences of needing to leave a round, Soibelman, Seick, and Trader (2020) share their autobiographical accounts of being disabled forensics competitors to confront ableist norms in the tournament experience. As Soibelman notes:

I am a disabled person. Using the adjective "disabled" implies that the disability is no fault of my own; rather, it is the fault of a society (or activity, in this case) that disables me. . . . Collegiate forensics organizations must consider disabled competitors in their pushes toward equity. (Soibelman et al., 2020, p. 127)

Soibelman's autobiographical narrative, in particular, may be one of the first published accounts of an autistic forensic competitor's experiences at intercollegiate speech tournaments. The description is worth quoting at length:

During my second year of competition, I almost exclusively watched limited preparation events and Communication Analysis. These events had the least emotional affect on the speaker's part, so it was easier for me to engage with the material. . . . I watched the [2016 AFA-NIET] Prose final. . . . With each ten-minute increment filled with emotion and sound, my chest tightened and stomach churned a bit more. At the end of the round, I sobbed, but not because I was moved by the performances; I was completely

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*overwhelmed*. . . Embarrassed, I ran to a quiet, secluded spot I found earlier during the tournament, breathing heavy and holding back tears. . . My disappearing act, as comforting as it was, had to end. Even today, I try to take tasks at the ballot table so I do not have to judge interpretation events. (Soibelman et al., 2020, p. 126, our emphasis)

Experiences like Soibelman's exist, and researchers are due to document these accounts if we are to make informed policy decisions. These works (Soibelman et al., 2020; Walker & Samens, 2020) are valuable in recognizing needs and locating better practices, and they expose our tendency to overgeneralize the experience of "feeling the need" to leave a round. Clearly, participants have several *distinct* reasons for finding rest areas at speech tournaments. Page | 40

The second theme of relevant literature deals with wellness in forensics. Focus on personal health in forensics has made strides but, for decades, has focused on the challenges of the forensics *educator* rather than the student. By far, Kay's (2018) review of literature demonstrates this disparity. Yet, some work has been student-focused. Some articles recognize student health as a significant concern or disadvantage of participating in forensics (Billings, 2011; Quenette et al., 2007).

The idea of mindfulness is still being defined within the broader discussions of forensics wellness, but the idea of a "mindfulness room" is not necessarily a novel one. Olson (2004) proposed one way of implementing a "wellness tournament" was through a "wellness lounge" that:

. . . should strive to be a comfortable environment in which to relax, perhaps visit with friends, and serve as a departure from the stress of the regular tournament. . . Perhaps soft music and other strategies that encourage participants to relax can provide a much-needed respite from the rigors of competition. (p. 45)

Unfortunately, forensics scholarship has placed little focus on wellness spaces at speech tournaments.

Similar types of spaces have gained traction on college campuses since Carnegie Mellon University implemented its own mindfulness room (Mindful Staff, 2014). Even U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Minnesota recently incorporated ". . . a sensory-inclusive room, providing fans with autism, dementia, Down syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder and other conditions a quiet, safe and soothing atmosphere. The space will also be staffed with licensed behavioral specialists during every home game" (Minnesota Vikings, 2019, para. 2). Clearly, wellness and neurodiversity are two distinct but interweaving threads in the contemporary discussions of mindfulness rooms. Perhaps more scholarship on *non-competitive* places at the intercollegiate speech tournament may help us understand further the benefits of an open door policy (ODP) and a mindfulness room (MR).

## Method

After obtaining CHSR (IRB) approval, descriptions of the open door policy and the mindfulness room were provided days before the swing in a “points of information” email to coaches who registered their attending teams.

To maximize the potential amount of exposure tournament participants would have to the new policy, we aimed to have a slip of paper featuring the following statement taped to every set of preliminary and final round ballots for the Saturday and Sunday portions of the swing. (We did learn a few rounds were missing the slips of paper, but a supermajority of rounds were assuredly provided this statement.) Judges were asked to read this statement at the start of every round they judged:

\*\*\*\*\*READ THIS STATEMENT ALOUD TO THE ROOM BEFORE BEGINNING THE ROUND\*\*\*\*\*

Competitors and judges are reminded that the [Tournament Name] Swing has an open-door policy for every round. Please feel free to leave the round as needed. Judges are reminded that competitors and observers shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time.

Competitors had access to this statement: 1.) by listening to their coaches (if coaches shared the information from the email) and 2.) by listening to the judge (if the judge complied with the mandate to read the statement aloud at the beginning of each round). In other words, students possibly heard about this policy statement for their very first time during their first few rounds of competition.

We administered the survey after final rounds before the awards ceremony for the Day 2 portion of the swing. Pre-awards was an ideal time and space to gain participant attention and offer the opportunity to participate. Littlefield and Sellnow (1992) noted conducting their study in a similar pre-awards time-space at the 1989 AFA-NIET: “twenty minutes before the awards ceremony” (p. 3). We followed suit.

Before awards, we provided a brief description of what unique features were made available at the tournament (the open door policy and the mindfulness room) and expressed interest in their thoughts about those changes. We provided a brief oral description of the survey, the purpose of the survey, and the process of considering participation and providing consent. Informed consent forms and paper surveys were given to all judges, coaches, and competitors physically present in the award ceremony space. (For hired judges, we offered the opportunity to fill out the survey at the conclusion of their service to the tournament. Only a few judges abstained.)

We presented paper surveys to everyone physically present and explained that if they did not want to participate, they could simply draw a picture or write down their favorite lyrics to a song. Paper surveys were used to reduce the chances of any one person feeling singled out as participating or not participating in the study. We also encouraged students to relocate if they

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wanted more privacy to complete their responses. We stressed again that participation was completely voluntary. Two separate collection boxes were provided at the back of the space (behind the seating area) to clearly separate identifying information in the consent forms from the survey responses. The collections in each box were then further physically mixed in random order to reduce the chances of researchers being able to correspond a response with a respondent. Thus, the responses were anonymous.

Paper surveys were used to avoid distractions like media notifications or participants using devices to potentially communicate with one another--which could impact the validity of their answers. An electronic survey could have been administered after the tournament, but we believe participation would have dropped significantly. Most importantly, because the survey asked about their perceptions of the tournament experience, it was important to conduct this inquiry as close as we could to *in situ*, or in the situation of the experience. Finally, this time period was ideal because performances were complete. Students were no longer actively preoccupied with focus on their own events. Students also typically use the pre-awards time to congregate, to decompress, to socialize, to reflect on their experiences, and to await results.

### The Survey

The survey was designed to gain feedback from tournament participants about the effectiveness of an experimental open door policy and a mindfulness room. Once conversations multiplied at NCA about the variety of anecdotal experiences people had, it became clear the results of a survey could be of value to broader conversations about better tournament practices.

The 16-item survey (see Appendix A) addressed several interrelated aspects of one's tournament experiences and prompted for a mix of quantitative and qualitative feedback. The first two questions dealt with demographics in terms of forensics position (student, coach, etc.) and gender identity. Question 3 asks about ever feeling the need to leave a competition round due to the content of a performance. Questions 6 and 7 address the comparison of feelings associated with leaving a round (previous experiences vs. this particular weekend). Questions 10, 11, and 12 addressed the effectiveness of the mindfulness room--both its structure and knowledge of its existence. For qualitative prompts, responses were coded by recurring themes. Quantitative prompts were analyzed for the mean, standard deviation, and statistical significance.

Finally, we are by no means health communication experts. We are, however, active members of the forensics community concerned with the wellness practices of tournaments and the support structures for its participants.

### Results & Discussion

Results suggest as many as 2 out of every 5 participants at a forensics tournament have felt the need to leave a round for mental health reasons due to the content of a performance. 40% of all

participants surveyed responded “Yes” to having ever felt like they needed to leave a round (Question 3).

Remarkably, of those that responded yes to Q3, 82% identified as women, nonbinary, or genderqueer; only 17% identified as men or simply “cis.” The reasons for this gender disparity are elusive. One possibility is that women and GSM (gender and sexual minority)

people are often related to the subject matter of material performed at tournaments. Especially in the last few years, subjects of sexual assault, consent, et cetera have become the foreground of several conversations at tournaments and conferences. Future research could follow the lead of Walker and Samens (2020) to identify how often competitors witness performances of trauma that resemble their own personal experiences.

A trend in the responses between competitors and coaches/alums is worth noting. Of those sampled who said yes to Question 3, 82% were competitors, 17% were coaches/alums. Perhaps this result was due to sample sizes, but it is clear competitors feel the need to leave more frequently. This contrast may be due to power differentials within the round. Judges are endowed with the agency to uphold or modify expectations of the round. Competitors, however, must negotiate their personal convictions with the expectations of the tournament, the judge, their programs, and their peers.

We wanted to understand the level of comfort participants felt in leaving rounds during previous tournaments in comparison with during a tournament with an open door policy. The survey asked participants to rank their comfort level in leaving a round on a scale from one to ten, one being low comfort and ten being high comfort. Regarding previous tournaments, we received 69 responses. The average comfort level was 4.07 with a standard deviation of 2.93. During a tournament with an open door policy, we received 69 responses. The average comfort level was 8.09 with a standard deviation of 2.02. The average increase in comfort level was 4.07. In a two-sample t-test where 1 (previous tournaments) < 2 (tournament with an open door policy) has a t value of -9.36. 2 is significantly greater than 1. Thus, our results indicate a strong correlation between the feelings of comfort in leaving a round and having an open door policy at tournaments.

### *How the policy affected in-round climate*

Question 15 asked: “How did the atmosphere in the room change after the policy was read?” Did participants perceive a shift, if any, in the in-round climate? Results indicated coaches and judges experienced the effects of the read policy in contrasting ways from competitors. While 76% of

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coaches/judges reported no obvious change in climate after the reading of the policy, 70% of competitors reported a noticeable positive change.

**Table 1**

	<b>Reported no obvious change</b>	<b>Reported a noticeable positive change</b>	<b>Miscellaneous comments</b>
<b>Coaches/judges (21)</b>	76% (16)	19% (4)	5% (1)
<b>Competitors (50)</b>	22% (11)	70% (35)	8% (4)
<b>TOTAL (71)</b>	38% (27)	55% (39)	7% (5)

There are several potential reasons for this disparity. First, the policy was written for the benefit of competitors, which may influence competitors specifically to have fairly consistent positive experiences with in-round climate. Second, because judges are endowed with the agency of running the competition round, judges (which includes coaches) may not fully realize how much their behaviors, like reading an ODP, impact in-round climate at tournaments. Finally, it is possible judges felt their needs were beyond the scope of the policy. As one coach participant asked: “How can a judge leave the round that they’re judging?” Another coach participant noted: “NOT FOR JUDGES - this does nothing to protect coaches. How am I allowed to leave if this is my job?” This may help answer why coaches/judges were reluctant to report a positive change after reading the ODP.

Results also suggest how limited coaches and judges may be in understanding competitors’ in-round experiences. The contrast in perception of in-round climate between coaches/judges and competitors clearly indicates that undergraduates offer an essential standpoint in conversations toward building tournament policies. If judge

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and coach perceptions were the only ones included in this analysis, the results would indicate that the reading of the open door policy was ineffective. But with student responses, the open door policy, even in its experimental run, clearly produced perceptions of increased positive in-round climate. Student input is valuable and essential.

### *The Mindfulness Room*

43% (n=31) of all surveyed participants reported visiting the MR. We asked participants who used the MR to rate its effectiveness on a scale of one to ten, one being not effective and ten being very effective. With 31 responses, the average was 8.67 with a standard deviation of 1.37. On average, applicable participants found the mindfulness room to be highly effective.

This experimental run of the mindfulness room, however, did have its obstacles. By far, the most common qualitative response we received was the mindfulness room was too small. The room was indeed small, approximately 10' x 15'.

**Figure 1**



## Exploring the Impacts of an Open Door Policy

Those who visited the MR were asked for one aspect of the room they would change (Question 12). The most popular response (30%) was to find a larger space. As many tournament directors know, demand for rooms adds up quickly (for competition, extemp prep, tab, and judges' lounge). The MR space was a study lounge and could comfortably seat approximately 5-7 people at a time. As a related theme, roughly 15% of comments (for Q12) noted the potential effects the small space would have on several competitors needing to decompress in the same space together. As one competitor noted: "I think complications could arise if competitors are going to the same room for a number of reasons - PTSD, catching breath, an anxiety attack, etc. are all mood-shifting circumstances." As another related theme to the room itself, roughly 18% of responses (Q12) suggested more seating or furniture to accommodate more visitors. Admittedly, in the already small space, only two bean bag chairs and a few chairs and a table were made available. Clearly, there was higher demand for the MR than anticipated.

The second-most popular theme (20%) in responses (Q12) when asked about potential changes was accessibility to the MR. Several responses noted the rather "out of the way" location of the MR, which was on the second floor of the main tournament building inside an office suite. Tournament directors noted this location for reasons that were part logistical (other rooms in use) and part privacy (ensuring those using the room were not put on display). Suggestions had subthemes of disability, convenience, and privacy. Some noted the second-floor could hinder access for physically disabled people and to increase accessibility by moving the MR to the first floor. Others noted the inconvenience of not being able to easily locate the MR and suggested the possibility of providing multiple mindfulness rooms.

Miscellaneous responses dealt with MR monitors and norms. One response noted: "I'm not sure about the moderator [*sic*]. That made me kind of uncomfortable." Anecdotally, one competitor verbally confided perhaps a peer monitor (like a competitor from a host school) might be more helpful than a judge or coach. A monitor sitting outside near the doorway may be more preferred than sitting in the actual room. One comment out of the 39 seems worth distinguishing in its own right regarding which norms were acceptable in the MR: "some expectation about talking/no talking/asking if it's okay to talk?" Due to the lack of specific expectations set in place for this novel space, students are met again with a perception of "unwritten rules" (Paine, 2005). Only 3 out of 39 (7%) of the comments had no criticisms.

Carmack (2016) noted forensics educators "run into problems" when trying to implement wellness strategies at tournaments and then facing "real logistical constraints" (p. 16). Based on the feedback we have received, we offer some ideas for tournament hosts considering a mindfulness room. These are by no means definitive or comprehensive and meant to serve as possibilities rather than rules:

1. Location - House the mindfulness room on the first floor of the main tournament building. If able, provide two rooms with plenty of space and opportunity for adjustable lighting. Avoid scheduling competition rounds next door.

2. Seating - Consider providing a variety of seating options for visitors. Bean bag chairs, blankets, and pillows are appreciated. Some students may use the space to rest.
3. Privacy - If the room space has a number of windows accessible to hallways, consider using curtains or paper to provide more privacy for visitors.
4. Monitor - A monitor for the mindfulness room helps ensure the safety of all visitors. Consider having a monitor sit outside of the room by the doorway so they are available as needed.<sup>2</sup>
5. Setting Norms & Expectations - Visitors will want to know the acceptable modes of behavior. Consider including an information sheet or welcome card. We encourage tournament directors to confer with current competitors to see which behaviors may be most helpful, but here are some possibilities:  

“Welcome! We are glad you’re here. Here are a few considerations for your time in the Mindfulness Room:

  - We encourage you to rest, to sleep, to stim, to read, and to scroll on your device as needed.
  - We ask you to keep any necessary conversations to a whisper to avoid disturbing other visitors. Please take all phone calls, social conversations, and audio playback of any kind to another location. Help us make this room mindful!
  - Do not disturb any visitor who is resting. If you are concerned about the well-being of another visitor, please notify the monitor (who is right outside the room) right away.
  - Attend your rounds as you are able. We appreciate your use of this space. Please stay mindful of your rounds and help us keep the tournament on time.
  - We appreciate any feedback you can offer to make this space more helpful. Please leave feedback in the card box.”
6. Getting the Word Out - Consider using multiple avenues to share information about the tournament mindfulness room such as...
  - a tournament invitation.
  - a tournament “points of information” email to attending schools.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the AFA-NST Title IX Officer, Dr. Kittie Grace, plans for the 2020 national tournament included providing certified counselors near the quiet room during competition hours. (K. Grace, personal communication, June 14, 2020).

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- a statement provided in the registration folders for attending schools on the day of competition.
- a sign outside of the mindfulness room.
- an announcement posted on the wall near the round schematics.
- a handout for visitors to take with them and share with their programs (which can be included in the MR, registration folders, and ballot packets).
- any corresponding social media disseminating information about the tournament.

### ***General Approval***

Question 16 allowed for any further comments respondents wished to share regarding the ODP or MR. From 51 respondents, we isolated 76 unique comments. Themes emerged: approval (66%), suggestions (25%), norms (9%).

An overwhelming majority of comments (66%, or 50/76 comments) conveyed approval in some form. Subthemes were *positive adjectives* (n=22) like “good” or “incredible” or “super dope,” *gratitude* (n=15) like “thank you” and “appreciate,” *affinity* (n=9) such as “like” or “love,” and *personal experiences* (n=4) relevant to the ODP and/or MR, such as “As a person with PTSD, knowing that I can leave made me less scared in every round. I didn’t have to look over my shoulder, if you will.” An overall sense of approval for the ODP and MR, at least in concept, was evident.

Another theme of suggestions (25%) offered concerns or potential solutions for the ODP and MR rather evenly. Finally, some comments discussed norms (9%) related to these features. While many comments conveyed skepticism about changing the norm like “. . . it might take people [*sic*] a while to break norms,” some comments expressed interest in changing norms: “I really hope other teams follow suit” and “I’ll talk to my coach about implementing [*sic*] similar changes to the next tournament we host!” The open door policy and mindfulness room were clearly valued features for tournament participants.

### **Limitations**

The data gathered for this study were from a single individual events swing. Further, no two tournament participants will have the same degrees of interaction with the two features of the swing. For example, hired judges may only serve for a few rounds. A school’s travel coach may trade places with another coach from Saturday to Sunday. Participants were not asked if they attended both days, but the majority (implicated by Speechwire) attended both days. For these reasons, we focused on perceptions rather than behavioral responses.

While we did receive a substantial amount of responses, these cultural expectations may be contained to their particular time and space-related contexts. Tournament trends vary by time

and region. But we argue the information presented here, at the very least, will aid forensics participants to gain more productive traction in finding better practices.

Finally, responses were limited in depth. We were not able to engage in a dialogue or open-ended discussion with participants about the complex details of each prompt. These glaring limitations signal clearly a need for future research.

### **Future Research**

Our open door policy did not actively take into account the needs of the judges. Survey results provided a few questions about supporting judges. What options do they have to leave a round they are judging? Are they *required* to disseminate information about the policy? Coaches may not disclose to their competitors all the details of the tournament or what their philosophies are against the policy. The open door policy is a text in continual refinement. For a Spring 2019 tournament, we implemented a revised version of the policy:

Please remember the [Name] Swing has an open door policy for every round. Feel free to leave the round as needed. Judges are reminded that competitors and observers shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time. Judges are encouraged to take a brief break as needed in between performances.

In Fall 2019, a revised version of this policy was adopted for the 2020 American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament.<sup>3</sup>

Building on the work of Walker and Samens (2020), future research must find ways for judges to practice self-care. One possibility may be similar to how we code against competitors or institutions. What if judges had the capacity to code against certain types of content? While this is not a cure-all by any stretch, a judge should have a say in what they are unable to process. The judge is responsible for adjudicating a round in its entirety. They may pause briefly between performances but, by all appearances, do not have the opportunity to leave. In the past few years, judges have tried to address these quandaries independently. Some judges will solicit coaches in the region to give a fair warning about certain types of content. Some judges will ask for only certain types of events (perhaps some events use pathos appeals and explicit material less frequently than others). Researchers could find value in exploring the effectiveness of a “coding against content” policy.

A distinct difference of perception between students and judges/coaches permeates the tournament experience. This may seem obvious through anecdotal experience, but more thorough research could reveal the sensemaking differences over “unwritten rules.” Perhaps this

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<sup>3</sup> The language adopted by the AFA-NIET committee at the 105th National Communication Association Convention on November 13, 2019 (before the name-change to AFA-NST) for the 2020 AFA-NIET tournament was: “The AFA-NIET has an open-door policy for every round. Competitors and observers may leave the round as needed and shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time. Please wait to return in between performances. Judges are encouraged to take a brief break as needed in between performances.”

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is due to the power differential. But recent work (Walker & Samens, 2020) confirms that judges also experience the need to leave and, at times, feel pressured to prioritize their role as adjudicator over their own personal needs. Such work demonstrates how soliciting responses from a specific population (judges who have been triggered) reveals tremendous insights to in-round experiences. More work should follow suit.

One clear area of future research is to detail thoroughly why specifically women, nonbinary, and genderqueer competitors have been more likely to feel unsafe in competition rounds. A qualitative, interview-driven study may assist in locating practices that better support forensics community members. More in-depth work must be done.

Researchers interested in intercollegiate forensics must examine experiences related to neurodiversity. Research lacks in-depth interviews with autistic people in forensics, especially with regard to the potentially high amounts of social interaction and sensory stimulation that comes with a typical speech tournament. Quite simply, how autistic people navigate their forensic tournament experiences, and even their *existence* at forensics tournaments, has been largely ignored by forensic researchers. Such scholarship has been unduly dependent upon autoethnographic accounts to generate discussion. As one respondent of this study noted: “I would love an additional judge statement about understanding neurodiversity . . . .” More research is clearly needed.

Future scholarship must enumerate the various reasons participants may feel the need to leave the round. Labeling these experiences as simply “harmful,” “triggering,” or “overwhelming” fails to apprehend different lived experiences. Experiences of autistic people (such as overstimulation) may be unduly conflated with the experiences of trauma survivors (such as being triggered). We recognize this as a limitation in our own study. Further work must be done to clarify these distinct lived experiences in order to produce commensurate solutions.

Scholarship may also help remedy logistical concerns for directing a tournament (Carmack, 2016). If a student misses a round, we believe the tournament director reserves the right to provide reasonable accommodations for any participant. Accommodations are (and should be) a regular feature of tournaments, such as dyslexia-friendly fonts and blocks for specific round locations for physically disabled students. Should a student miss a round for personal reasons, we encourage tournament directors to find the most reasonable possibility, given the circumstances. For instance, if a student misses the first round, could it be possible to enter that student into two sections for the second round? If the student misses the second round, could it be possible for the judge to wait for the last competitor to perform before ranking the round (as often is the case with students running late)? As educators honor accommodation plans in the classroom, a clear avenue of future research is exploring how accommodation plans could be more formalized in a forensics context.

Finally, what makes a room mindful? Researchers could place exclusive focus on the MR to collect more nuanced responses. With NFA 2019’s commitment to open door policy and a “quiet room,” forensics educators and participants have a responsibility to confirm if such

changes are indeed helpful. Considering that national tournaments develop at a relatively slow and infrequent speed, data from even regional tournaments can be valuable.

## Conclusion

Overall results indicated competitors experienced an increase in feelings of confidence to leave rounds as needed. Women, nonbinary, and genderqueer competitors disproportionately reported having felt the need to leave a round for mental health reasons due to the content of a performance. Coaches/judges have diverging perceptions from those of competitors regarding in-round climate changes after the reading of the open door policy. Students found the mindfulness room great in concept but needing improvement in execution (such as the size of the space, accessibility, and clearer expectations of accepted behaviors).

Competitors and non-competing undergraduate forensics students (admin assistants, etc.) must be included in the decision-making processes in their forensics communities--including but not limited to elected positions of representation, panels, symposiums, and surveys. While conducting research may add some time to administering the tournament experience, published

Let's research. Let's document.  
Let's provide a better blueprint for  
those doing this activity after us.

research provides a more formalized venue for vastly different standpoints on the activity to meet each other where we are--and deliberate on where we could be.

We hope implementation of open door policies will empower students with more agency to use at *their* discretion and will guide better practices for the next generation of forensics coaches. Let's research. Let's document. Let's provide a better blueprint for those doing this activity after us.



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**APPENDIX**

Exploring the Impacts of an “Open Door” Policy at the Intercollegiate Speech (Individual Events) Tournament

The researchers would like you to detail your tournament experiences from current and previous seasons. You are welcome to discontinue at any time if you wish to not complete the survey. Please answer as fully as you are willing - the more detail you provide the richer the data we have to work with concerning the impacts of the “open-door policy” and “mindfulness room” on intercollegiate forensics competition culture. Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey!

1. Circle the description that most fits: I am a(n)....

coach                      hired judge      competitor      alumnus              observer

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender identity? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you ever felt like you needed to leave a speech tournament round because the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

Yes              or              No

4. How many times did you hear the open door policy read aloud in rounds this weekend? (If not sure, provide an estimated number of times.) \_\_\_\_\_

5. Have you attended another tournament that implemented a clear “open-door” policy?

Yes              or              No

6. In the past, on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest) how comfortable did you feel with the option of getting up to leave the room if the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

Low comfort

Mid-comfort

High comfort

7. This weekend, on a 1-10 how comfortable did you feel in the option of getting up to leave the room if the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10  
Low comfort                      Mid-comfort                      High comfort

8. Did you believe that the open door policy being read before round made people in the rooms feel more comfortable with having the option to leave if the content of a speech or performance did/could put you into dangerous or potentially harmful mental space?

Yes            or            No

9. On a scale of 1 to 10, how effective did you find the reading of the open door policy at the beginning of each round?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

10. Did you use the mindfulness room?

Yes            or            No

10a. If yes, on a scale of 1 to 10, how effective did you find the mindfulness room?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

11. Did knowing the mindfulness room existing at this tournament increase feelings of safety or support?

Yes            or            No

12. What is one thing you would change about the mindfulness room?

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13. Here is the wording of the open door policy:

“Competitors and judges are reminded that the [name of regional] Swing has an open-door policy for every round. Please feel free to leave the round as needed. Judges are reminded that competitors and observers shall not be penalized for exiting a round at any time.”

After hearing the policy read aloud in rounds this weekend, do you believe the wording of this policy is effective? Do you think there are any parts of the policy wording that should be changed? If yes, what would you change?

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14. What changes, if any, would you feel need to be made to the open-door policy that could make it more effective?

15. How did the atmosphere in the room change after the policy was read?

16. What further comments do you have about the open door policy and/or the mindfulness room? Any feedback is truly appreciated!

Thank you for taking time to complete the survey! Please fold this paper in half and leave in the submission box.

