

GRADUATE STUDENTS AND FORENSIC RESEARCH

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Rieke and Brock briefly summarize one of the primary obstacles facing graduate student research in forensic theory and practice:

Although directors of forensics may have advanced degrees in speech communication, their fields of graduate study usually were not argumentation, decision making, forensics, etc. Graduate study in rhetorical criticism and the history of public address, providing few if any courses in the above mentioned areas of investigation...graduate students exhibit a split personality. Deeply committed to forensics largely because of their participation in high school and college, they want to assume a faculty position as director of forensics, but find themselves intellectually engaged in studying other communication specialties (129-130).

As Rieke and Brock conclude, "students who do want to emphasize forensics-related studies at the graduate level have difficulty doing so" (130). This observation from 1975 continues to hold true in 1990. Even a cursory examination of the various forensic journals reveals a lack of student-conducted research. Few articles authored by graduate students appear in publications such as *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *CEDA Yearbook*, the *National Forensic Journal*, or the proceedings of the summer argumentation conferences.

This article suggests an increasing role for graduate student research in forensics. Initially considered are some of the problems with, and opportunities for, research in forensic theory and practice. The article concludes by examining the opportunities for graduate student research in forensics.

Wayne Thompson provides a common perspective on most of the research conducted on forensic practice:

Perhaps no potentially major area for quantitative study in the speech field has produced research so banal and provincial as has debate. Most of the studies have dealt with intercollegiate competition, and the principal secondary interest has been the effects and the values. These investigations, although of considerable interest to student debaters and coaches, do not illuminate general psychological or rhetorical issues (qtd. in Rieke and Brock 131).

Others continue this general indictment. Walwik suggests "research in our field has been limited and often of dubious quality" (43). Andersen argues "recent research conducted in the area of debate and forensics has no interest in and no generalizability beyond that narrow situation" (155). McGlone's charge is researchers "have investigated contest debating alone and produced findings with limited or no applicability

**National Forensic Journal* VIII (Spring 1990), pp. 45-49.

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beyond the subjects who were actually involved in the research" (54). Zarefsky indicated "a myopic focus on 'forensic activities' makes the research which is done relatively trivial in scope" (22). As Logue and Shea conclude, "the forensic laboratory is an important concept, but the scholarship that has been generated about it has little utility beyond the competitive forensic event about which it was written" (454).

A variety of areas for future research in forensics exists. The report on the National Developmental Conference on Forensics outlined several research questions, most of which remain unanswered (35-36). There are at least four discrete areas in which to focus future research efforts. Those include research on real-world applications of forensics, and studies on argumentation theory, forensics pedagogy, and tournament practice.

1. Real-World Applications. A common concern of those indicting forensic research is that real-world application of forensic practice should increase. Andersen's review of forensic research concludes there is "less and less study of argumentation in the wide range of real-life settings in which it occurs" (155). Walwik issues a call for more research to measure and evaluate the relationship between the academic world of forensic practice and the real world (45). Polk suggests such study would "aid in determining the relevance of academic forensic training to speaking and decision making in the non-academic world" (40). In this manner, McBath, Bartanen, and Gossett state:

There is an obvious call for research efforts into substantive debate, the application of argumentative principles to fields outside academe. The kind of quality of research activity in legal argumentation can be extended to government, politics, advertising, industry, judiciary, volunteer associations, and wherever else people use reason giving as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values (qtd. in Thomas, "Sedalia" 252-253).

McGlone proposes several research areas related to forensic training and its relationship to other endeavors. He includes the effects of debate as a decision-making process, whether forensics fosters the development of extemporaneous speaking skills, does forensics improve reasoning and critical thinking, and whether forensics participation increases the ability to research efficiently (54).

2. Argumentation Theory. The Sedalia conferees argued that unless an ongoing process of research occurs, the discipline of forensics could atrophy, becoming a closed system (15). As such, there is a continuing need to conduct research into the theoretical assumptions of forensic practice. Not only should the classical roots of the discipline receive continued examination, but changes in those assumptions dictated by the post-modern world should also undergo scrutiny.

Included in this area is a possibility for increased interdisciplinary research in forensics. Sedilia recognized that theoretical advances from other disciplines could have important implications for forensic theory. Notable examples of such research in the debate literature include the incorporation of policy systems analysis, hypothesis testing, and games theory as paradigms of debate. Similarly, forensics researchers should attempt to increase the application of their studies to other disciplines, as outlined in the previous discussion of real-world application of argumentation theory.

3. Forensics Pedagogy. An often neglected area of research centers around pedagogical concerns (Logue and Shea 453). While the *Forensic Educator* and a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* (23:4) both consider pedagogic concerns, more work remains to be done in this area. Several research opportunities exist related to forensics pedagogy. For example, what are the effects of various learning methods on forensics training (classroom lecture, tournament practice, summer institutes, etc.)? How does forensic training effect personality development, critical thinking, and communication skills? What variables influence judging decisions, and what is the reliability and validity of those decisions (McBath 36)?

4. Tournament Practice. One of the Sedilia recommendations was that an increase in research into tournament practices should occur (32). The report of the Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics suggests "while new events and formats can enhance the educational value of forensics, innovation should not preclude evaluation of *current* events and formats" (44). Smith ("Format" and "Theory") suggests several possible avenues of research in this area. Additionally, there continues to be concern over the actual relationship between forensic theory and tournament practice.

Opportunities for graduate student research exist in each of these four areas. Similarly, there are a variety of outlets available to students for such studies. Initially, graduate programs should follow the Sedilia recommendation and encourage more master's theses and doctoral dissertations on argumentation and forensics. As the Sedilia report suggests, such research "further our understanding of people communicating arguments and concern" (38).

Second, graduate students should submit their research to various interest groups for presentation at state, regional, and national professional conventions. For example, several Speech Communication Association divisions and affiliated organizations are directly concerned with research in forensics. These include the following: the Forensics Division, American Forensic Association, Cross Examination Debate Association, National Forensic Association, Phi Rho Pi,

and Pi Kappa Delta. In addition, The Committee on Joint Appearances of Political Candidates, the Task Force on Presidential Communication, and the Commission on Communication and the Law, among others, provide potential convention outlets for real-world applications of forensic research.

Additionally, there are two other prime opportunities for graduate student presentations at conventions. The first of these is the Student Section. There are no topic restrictions on such research. The Student Section also solely considers studies conducted by students. Second, most divisions and affiliated organizations sponsor debut programs devoted to researchers who have never presented a paper at a national convention.

A third opportunity for dissemination of graduate student research is the variety of professional journals devoted to forensics. Such journals include *Argumentation and Advocacy*, the *CEDA Yearbook*, the *National Forensic Journal*, *Speaker and Gavel*, the *Forensic Educator*, and *The Forensic*. The prospect of having their research submitted to editorial scrutiny should not discourage graduate student research. As Logue and Shea indicate, "with so many forensic outlets, the problem is not one for a writer locating a publication, it is for editors finding quality manuscripts" (453).

Forensics researchers have a wealth of important issues on which to conduct future research. Andersen illustrates the importance of continuing research in forensic theory and practice:

In an age of educational accountability, the forensics community is and will increasingly be called upon to tell what it seeks to do, how well it accomplishes its goals, and what other effects it has. Surprisingly, there seems little interest in such research at this time (155).

Graduate students are a prime group to engage in such studies. Not only will such research foster advances in the field of forensics, but it will also serve to increase the professional advancement of graduate students.

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