

ON PUBLISHING AND PERISHING: SOME APPROACHES IN FORENSIC RESEARCH

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One of the major concerns facing the participants of the first national conference on forensics—the Sedalia Conference—some twenty-five years ago was nature and production of research. Beginning with the observation, "If forensics is to improve its status with colleagues and in other disciplines, it will be through heightened emphasis on research and scholarship" (Forensics as Communication, 34), the conference went on to articulate goals and methods for enhancing research in forensics. Such recommendations included recognizing the diversity of methods possible in forensic research; increasing the dissemination of forensic scholarship; having professional organizations sponsor and support forensic research; and focusing on the characteristics of those engaged in forensics. The conference clearly created a call to research in forensics (Forensics as Communication, 37-40).

That was in 1974. The Sedalia Conference also recommended a follow-up conference to reassess these recommendations and their implementation. The Northwestern Conference, held in 1984, did not, however, assess *per se* the recommendations of Sedalia concerning research. It did consider research in formulating promotion and tenure standards that were most appropriate to forensic educators. There was very little effort by this conference to change the definition or nature of research that should be evaluated. Instead, they argued for a quality rather than a quantity standard for evaluating research.

Forensics educators should satisfy each standard at the same level of QUALITY expected of their colleagues; the AMOUNT of teaching, scholarship, and service, however, may distinguish forensic educators from their colleagues. Because of the nature of their assignment, forensic educators will SHOW MORE in some categories and less in others. Evaluations, therefore, should be the result not of counting but of WEIGHING their quality. Moreover, the CRITERIA for determining whether standards are met will distinguish forensics educators from their colleagues, because of the nontraditional circumstances in which forensic educators engage in teaching, scholarship, and service (American Forensics in Perspective, 25-26; emphasis in original).

Forensic educators have long been familiar with "nontraditional circumstances." These have included a seven day work week when weekend travel is added to a normal teaching week; long hours of travel often by the oldest and least comfortable university van available; a budget which reduces food choices to a comparison between

**National Forensic Journal*, VIII (Spring 1990), 69-72.

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McDonalds and Wendy's; and an education in contemporary music guaranteed to produce hearing loss. The forensic educator does, indeed, experience "non-traditional circumstances," quite different from his or her colleague, such as a professor of physics who now has the task of evaluating the forensic director for tenure.

Without belaboring the obvious, it should not be surprising that the "non-traditional circumstances" result in a rapid turnover of debate and individual events coaches, a decrease in the number of forensic educators being prepared in our graduate schools, and increased difficulty in gaining promotion and tenure for the forensic director. In fact, in some colleges and universities, the coach is employed in an "administrative position," not subject to the normal evaluation of educators, but subject to the evaluation of a single individual, usually a dean, and without any meaningful procedural safeguards. The hiring of debate coaches as "non-faculty" hardly increases the attractiveness of forensic education, nor does it enhance the longevity of forensic careers.

However, the dominant criterion for evaluation of faculty will continue to remain the category of research. While promotion and tenure committees will often be ambiguous in specifying the relative weights of teaching, research, and service, estimates of the weight of research have been as high as 65%. So while the forensic educator seeking promotion and tenure may argue for a different weighting of factors due to the "non-traditional circumstances" of his or her position, the approach taken to research will likely remain the key to success.

It may well be that the "non-traditional circumstances" will also result in some "non-traditional" research. Promotion and tenure committees have little difficulty in understanding and evaluating articles in standard form, refereed by peers, and published in leading national journals. The field of forensics should pay special attention to guaranteeing a forum for such research. Increasing the available forums, such as the creation of this very journal, should be of help in that regard.

Forensic coaches are by nature critics. In fact, because of their training, aptitude and regular activity, they engage in more criticism than almost any faculty member. However, most of the criticism is cryptic and even more is oral. By cryptic, I mean that a complex set of reasons for judgment is truncated into a written ballot, usually under the pressure of time. Oral criticisms, when time permits, have all the advantages of immediacy and none of the advantages of permanence. Hence the criticism in which a coach engages is either cryptic or ephemeral. Neither characteristic particularly impresses promotion and tenure committees.

While refereed articles will be of more help to the promotion file, there are other opportunities to engage in research. In broadening the

definition of research, the recommendations of the Northwestern Conference on Forensics include:

6. Development or criticism of argument in the public forum, such as political debate, governmental affairs, and economic and social issues.
7. Creative or artistic productions. (*American Forensics in Perspective*, 29).

The recommendations of the Sedalia Conference on research seem to assume that all research will be in forensics. Clearly this need not be the case. If it is accurate to assume that all forensic coaches will have some training in criticism, the methods employed can extend to any number of areas. Any public discourse, for example a governmental action with its accompanying rhetoric, becomes available for the forensic educator's scrutiny. Arguments from the national debate topic of a given year can make excellent examples of available discourse for critical analysis. It may be that the most common method becomes argumentative criticism, but that surely is one area where the forensic coach's talents excel.

After twenty-four years of directing a large and active debate program, I retired to a much "softer" job: directing a large and active graduate program. Those twenty-four years demonstrated with clarity to me several generalizations (known mystically as "Jayhawk truths"). First, I would argue that no undergraduate works harder or engages in more research than the active debater; and second, I would argue that no graduate student seeking a degree works harder than those also coaching debate. Unfortunately, this effort of debaters and coaches is not often recognized and less often appropriately rewarded.

As a director of graduate study, I have become concerned with the relationship of forensics to the graduate programs in America. In 1974, the Sedalia Conference made the following recommendation:

All institutions granting a doctoral degree in speech communication should have an active forensic program providing supervised instruction for future forensic educators (*Forensics as Communication*, 45).

This goal of 1974 seems further from enactment twenty-five years later. In an era of specialization and budget crunches, one is more likely to see institutions with doctoral programs reduce in size or scope or even eliminate the forensics program. As a field, we are turning out fewer directors of forensics than we were in 1974. (While this trend has provided an attractive "buyers market" for those few finishing the doctorate and coaching forensics, it hardly improves the health of the field.) There seem to be fewer students entering graduate school with an interest in coaching debate. Part of the reason may lie in the lack of appropriate compensation for working with forensics while in graduate

school. The reduction of one course is hardly equivalent to one's work in debate. The additional remuneration for working with debate equal to that of a departmental chair's assistant or a course grader is also inappropriate. The remuneration for a forensic assistant must be appropriate to the programmatic expectation; in most cases this means that at the outset the "extra remuneration" should be doubled. Similarly a one course reduction in a four-course load to direct forensics will hardly encourage graduates to enter the field; in most cases this means that the course reduction should be doubled.

The values of forensics as an activity are as real today as they were to those attending the 1974 Sedalia Conference. These still include a commitment to "develop students' communicative abilities, especially the abilities to analyze controversies, select and evaluate evidence, construct and refute arguments, and understand and use the values of the audience as warrants for belief" (Forensics as Communication, 16). The problem is that we have failed to heed the recommendations of the Sedalia Conference. With some attention to those ideas and ideals, there is no reason that we cannot increase interest in the activity, increase the number of graduate students interested in debate and individual events and, as a consequence, increase the number of potential directors of forensics. With greater professional commitment to the activity, there is no reason why forensics programs and their directors will not only survive in the academic world, but actually prosper.

References

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