

An Assessment of University Administrators: Do They Value Competitive Debate and Individual Events Programs?

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Although the First and Second Developmental Conferences on Forensics identified the cultivation of administrative support for forensic programs as an important dimension of the forensic director's job, little published research exists to measure the levels of administrative support for such programs. In fact, beyond the survey commissioned by the First Developmental Conference (Pearce, 1974) "to determine what forensics was thought of by groups in the speech communication profession" (p. 134), no study has explored the attitudes of collegiate administrators regarding the values associated with the existence of competitive forensics as a dimension of the college or university's overall academic program.

At the Developmental Conference on Individual Events in 1988, strategies were introduced to build administrative support for competitive forensics. Greenstreet (1988) suggested that a rationale for individual events should be consistent with the mission statement for each institution and steps should be taken to encourage more administrative support. Harris (1988) recommended the creation of annual reports to enable forensic directors to publicize and review their activities in relation to administrative priorities and their own effectiveness in reaching their objectives. Underberg (1988) urged "the collection and dissemination of information about funding levels, activity levels, and instructional demands in forensics" (p. ii). With this information, directors of forensics might be able to better secure support for their forensic programs. Others actually called for a survey of administrative attitudes and institutional support for forensic programs (Littlefield, 1988).

The assumption underlying these suggestions seemingly questions the organizational support for forensic programs among administrators. Discovering some of the prevailing attitudes of administrators regarding the value of forensic programs provides insight into reasons why programs have continued to exist on some campuses while not on others. The present study identifies and interprets some of the attitudes and levels of support that exist on college campuses regarding the value of competitive speech and debate activities.

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PROCEDURE

The procedure used in this study consisted of mailing the questionnaire to the chief administrative officer (CEO) at every institution identified in the Speech Communication's 1988 Directory. The survey sought to obtain demographic information about the institution, the status of forensic activities on the campus, and the levels of support for forensic programs.

The cover letter requested the CEO to pass the questionnaire along to any administrator or individual who could comment on the past and present speech and debate activities occurring on that particular campus, should the CEO be unfamiliar with or too busy to respond to the survey.

Subjects

The subjects were nominally defined as chief administrative officers at all institutions listed by department in the 1988 SCA Directory. Eleven hundred surveys were mailed to these institutions in the 50 states and foreign countries where affiliated SCA departments are located. Three hundred and thirty-nine questionnaires were returned, approximating a 31 percent response rate. A 30 percent response rate for mass-mailed questionnaires is considered normal (Pearce, 1974).

TABLE ONE
Respondents by Administrative Level and Size of Institution

	Administrative Level*										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	TOTAL	
Size of Institution											
0-1999	31	25	5	7	33	8	1	1	4	115	34%
2000-3999	17	11	3	2	16	3	1	0	2	55	16%
4000-5999	11	8	0	1	9	6	1	0	1	37	11%
6000-7999	7	7	0	4	1	3	1	1	3	27	8%
8000-9999	8	5	2	1	8	5	1	0	1	31	9%
10000-plus	12	7	9	7	11	21	4	0	3	74	22%
Totals	86	63	19	22	78	46	9	2	14	339	
	25%	19%	6%	6%	23%	14%	3%	1%	3%	100%	

**Administrative Level*

- 1 = Presidents, provosts, chancellors
- 2 = Vice presidents, vice chancellors
- 3 = Administrative Assistants to Categories 1 and 2
- 4 = Directors of college/university offices
- 5 = Deans
- 6 = Chairs
- 7 = Directors of forensics
- 8 = Faculty members asked to respond
- 9 = No response

Table One identifies the number of respondents, their administrative levels, and the size of their institutions. The respondents reflected a rather wide distribution. However, the greatest percentage of the total number of responding administrators came from institutions with enrollments under 2,000 students.

Instrument

A questionnaire using both closed and open-ended questions was developed which asked for the following information: The level of the "chief administrative officer" who completed the survey; demographic information about the institution (student enrollment); status of debate and individual events programs at the institution; levels of personal and institutional support for forensic programs; and limited data on levels of budgetary and faculty allocations made during the 1987-88 academic year. The questionnaire was reviewed by several administrators at an upper midwestern university. Following the suggestions of these individuals, minor modifications were made prior to the mailing of the survey.

RESULTS

Status of Forensic Programs

To secure information regarding current and past funding of forensic programs, the survey inquired as to whether or not the institution had ever funded a debate or individual events team and whether or not the institution currently funded either or both of these dimensions of a forensic program. Table Two identifies the frequency of the responses for debate and individual events programs.

TABLE TWO
Indication of Past and Current Funding for Debate and Individual Events Programs at Responding Institutions

	Debate		Individual Events	
	<i>Past</i>	<i>Current</i>	Past	Current
Yes	225	149	189	132
No	55	149	83	165
Unsure	26	6	37	8
No Response	33	35	30	34
Total		339		339

The data suggest that the number of debate programs at the responding institutions had declined by 76 (from 225 to 149); while the number of individual events programs had been reduced by 57 (from 189 to 132).

Barriers Precluding Institutional Support

For those institutions not currently funding a debate or individual events program, four barriers were offered from which administrators were asked to prioritize with a "1" reflecting the greatest barrier, "2" next greatest barrier, through "4." If the administrators wished to offer a barrier of their own, the option was provided and then the prioritization could include a rank of "5." The four barriers identified by several independent, university-level administrators when the survey instrument was developed, included lack of monetary resources to sustain a program, lack of student interest in debate or IE programs, lack of faculty/coach interest in debate or IE programs, and lack of an institutional priority.

TABLE THREE
Perceived Barriers to Institutional Support
Resulting in the Discontinuation of Debate and
Individual Events Programs at Responding Schools

Level of Barrier	Barriers				
	1	2	3	4	5
Greatest Barrier	34 (30%)	30 (28%)	21 (21%)	17 (19%)	2 a
(% of Total by Barrier)					
2nd	21	22	27	14	1 b
3rd	21	17	22	14	2 c
4th	11	13	8	13	1 d
5th	0	0	0	2	1 e
Barrier (Unranked)	25	24	22	23	4 f
Total by Barrier	112	106	100	86	11
No Response	227	233	239	253	328

Barriers

1 = Lack of monetary resources to sustain program

2 = Lack of student interest in debate/IE program

3 = Lack of faculty/coach interest in debate/IE program

4 = Not an institutional priority

5 = Other, as specified:

a = Speech course only; 100% commuter institution

b = We live in Alaska

c = Student on/off pattern; too many competing extracurricular activities

d = Nature of student body, commuter school

e = Speech not required for graduation

f = Not popular at 2-year colleges; no opponents because only university on an island; we decided programs do not help students to improve communication skills; need to use faculty for other assignments

The data revealed that a lack of monetary resources was the greatest barrier to the continuation of speech and debate programs.

Benefits Perceived From Forensic Programs

For those administrators from institutions currently funding debate and/or individual events programs, four benefits were offered from which respondents were asked to prioritize using a "1" to reflect the greatest benefit, "2" for the next greatest benefit, through "4." If the administrators provided an additional benefit not listed, the ranking would include a "5." The benefits identified by several independent, university-level administrators when the survey instrument was developed, and generally reflective of the recognized values held by members of the forensic community (Parson, 1984), included that debate and individual events programs enhanced the recruitment of students to the institution, the recruitment of faculty, the attraction of scholarship contributions, and enhanced the education of students.

TABLE FOUR
Perceived Benefits to Institutions having Debate and/or
Individual Events Programs

Level of Benefit	Benefits				
	1	2	3	4	5
Greatest Benefit (% of Total by Benefit)	18 (10%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	101 (49%)	3 a
2nd	74	3	9	17	12 b
3rd	19	34	29	3	7 c
4th	4	27	35	3	2 d
5th	1	8	3	0	2 e
Benefit (Unranked)	54	11	14	82	13 f
Total by Benefit	170	85	90	206	39
No Response	169	254	249	133	300

Benefits

1 = Enhances recruitment of students

2 = Enhances recruitment of faculty

3 = Attracts scholarship contributions

4 = Enhances education of students

5 = Other, as specified:

a = Enhances public image; provides opportunity for student performance and recognition; application of theory brings together the value of a liberal arts

b = Institutional recognition and visibility; improves retention and student satisfaction; provides major interest activity for these students who wish this sort of student participation; alumni involvement; increases their understanding of significant issues, both national and international; enhances ethos of institution (2); enhances school/community relations; helps maintain an academic campus atmosphere; PR (2)

c = Institutional visibility (3); enhances institution's reputation (2); encourages nonuniversity attendance at international debates; excellent for job hunting

d = Gives program visibility with administration and public; enhances university image

e = Enhances image of college; concentrates attention on a rigorous *academically-oriented* program

f = Favorable publicity (5); we have an outstanding coach who has earned support; adds a dimension of educational quality and opportunity; improves communication skills of students; aids in building networks; assists with public image of institution through news media and service projects; integral part of communication studies department curriculum; enhances academic reputation; supplementary experience; institutional prestige

The data suggest that enhancing a student's education and recruiting students were the greatest benefits to be gained from having debate or individual events programs.

Personal Assessment of Value of Forensic Experience

Aside from institutional support or lack thereof, administrators were asked to provide their personal assessment of a debate or individual events team as an activity for students at their institutions. Using a Likert Scale (5 to 1) with "5" indicating that the administrator valued the team(s) as very important, "3" indicating moderate importance, and "1" as very unimportant, the following results were compiled in Table Five.

TABLE FIVE
Personal Assessments of a Debate or Individual
Events Team as an Activity for Students

Level of Importance	Administrative Level*									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Very Important	27	17	5	8	23	22	7	1	3	113(34%)
4	27	21	9	5	28	10	0	1	3	104 (31%)
3	23	18	2	5	23	7	1	0	3	82 (25%)
2	7	6	2	3	3	3	1	0	0	25 (8%)
Very Unimportant	1	1	0	0		3	0	0	1	8 (2%)
No Response	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	3	7

*Administrative Level

1 = President, provosts, chancellors

2 = Vice presidents, vice chancellor

3 = Administrative assistants to categories 1 and 2

4 = Directors of college/university officers

5 = Deans

6 = Chairs

7 = Directors of forensics

8 = Faculty members

9 = No response

Sixty-five percent of those responding valued the forensic experience as "very important" or "important" as an activity for students.

Institutional Support of Debate and IE Teams

To gather some limited data on levels of institutional support, in terms of coaching staff, administrators were asked to use 1987-88 figures and indicate the number of full-time, tenure track and full-time, non-tenure track positions. If they were unsure, they were to leave the

blanks unfilled. The number of part-time faculty and graduate assistants used as coaches for debate and IE teams was also solicited.

TABLE SIX
Selected 1987-88 Number of Coaching Positions
for Debate and IE Teams at Responding Institutions

Type of Positions	Number of Positions						Total	No Response
	1	2	3	4	5 +			
Full-time, tenure track	76	17	1	-	-	91	26%	248
Full-time, nontenure	17	7	-	-	-	24	7%	215
Part-time faculty	52	12	3	-	-	67	19%	272
Graduate Assistants	16	9	4	4	2	35	10%	304

Funding levels, as well as from where the funds used to support the programs were drawn, were requested. While some programs had separate funds to support team and coaching staff travel, other institutions allocated funds for general use by both team and coaching staff. Table Seven identifies levels of funding for the 1987-88 academic year.

TABLE SEVEN
Selected 1987-88 Levels of Travel Support
for Team and Coaching Staff

Level of Funding	Team Travel		Coaching Staff Travel
\$ 0- 2999	32	18%	33
\$ 3999- 5999	40	23%	6
\$ 6000- 8999	25	14%	*
\$9000-11999	22	13%	*
\$12000-14999	12	7%	*
\$15000-above	38	22%	1
			*Included with team (101)
No response	170	50%	198

The source of the funding for the team travel and coaching staff travel was also requested from the administrators. Respondents were asked to provide the name of the source of the funding.

TABLE EIGHT
Sources of Funding for Team Travel at Responding Schools

Source of Funding	Team Travel		Coaching Staff Travel
College Academic Dean's Budget	20	12%	9
General University Fund	63	38%	16
Student Government	36	22%	3
Departmental General Budget	10	6%	9
Departmental Instructional Budget	6	3%	1
Combination of Above	23	14%	2
Fundraising	3	1%	-
Private Sources	1	1%	-
Included with Team	1	1%	102
No Response	177		197

In brief, the results of the survey provided data corresponding to past and current funding of debate and IE teams, barriers precluding institutional support for forensic programs, benefits of debate and IE teams, personal assessments regarding the value of these teams, and limited data regarding 1987-88 levels of support for debate and IE teams in terms of coaching positions and funding levels.

DISCUSSION

For the institutions responding, the data suggest that over the years, the number of debate and individual events programs dropped. The data explaining this decline indicate that a lack of monetary resources to sustain the programs, followed by a lack of student interest, a lack of faculty/coach interest, and the absence of an institutional priority all affected the programs no longer in existence.

Despite the reduction in debate and IE programs, for those institutions with forensic teams, the vast majority indicated that the greatest benefit to institutions was the enhanced education of their students. This was followed by the enhanced recruitment of students for their institutions. By and large, administrators personally valued having debate and individual events teams as an activity for students at their institutions. Sixty-five percent considered the presence of these teams as either very important or important compared with 10 percent who valued debate and individual events as unimportant or very unimportant. The fact that 97 percent of those responding to the survey answered this particular question, reflects the relatively high level of

support found among administrators for debate and individual events activities. In Table Five, four groups of administrators at different levels of budgetary control (presidents, provosts, chancellors, vice presidents, vice chancellors, deans, and department chairs) indicated the high value they placed on debate and IE as activities for students. Seventy-eight percent of the 113 respondents who ranked debated and IE teams as very important fell into these categories.

Institutional support varied. Eighty-one percent of the responding administrators with one full-time faculty forensic coach indicated that the position was a tenure track. For the most part, administrators responding had either one or two coaches at their institutions. Levels of funding for debate and IE teams would suggest that the most common budget range was between \$3,000 and \$5,999 during the 1987-88 academic year. A majority of the programs reviewed (78 percent) included funds to support the coaching staff within the team's travel budget. Based upon the data, the reliance upon institutional budgets was greater than reliance upon student government funds or departmental/institutional budgets.

The many "no responses" in Tables Six, Seven, and Eight also reflect the values or attitudes of the administrators who answered the survey. Clearly, many respondents were able and willing to share their attitudes on value questions in the survey. However, when asked for more specific information about budgets and institutional support, there may have been some reluctance, or at least an indifference to finding out this information and providing it to the researcher. Organizationally, if the survey were passed along to individuals without specific knowledge of the programs involved, this might reflect the general attitude of the highest administrator toward this project or its area of focus. Despite the no response rates, the information collected provides insight into some programs on a national level.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The assumption underlying this study questioned the levels of support for forensic programs among administrators who tend to control the funding for these programs. Despite the identification of benefits for those institutions having debate and IE teams, the data suggest that there are fewer programs in the responding schools now than in the past. Although a majority of the administrators personally viewed having forensic teams as very important or important, the data are not conclusive as to whether these personal "feelings of value" translate into faculty positions or funding.

The large "no response" rate for the questions requesting information about faculty positions and budget sources and levels makes the

development of generalizable conclusions in this area difficult. However, there is a value in exploring attitudes and levels of support at various institutions. While this study cannot claim to provide reasons why some programs continue to exist while others cease, the collection of the kinds of information included here is useful for the forensic director seeking to provide information about other programs to local administrators. Administrators may find this study interesting as they compare their levels of support for debate and IE Programs with the others across the country. Simply being aware that travel funds can be acquired from varying sources may spark an administrator to review her or his method of supporting forensic programs.

Comparing the level of institutional commitment, in the form of tenure track/tenured faculty versus part-time faculty, may also suggest variations in terms of funding options that are available. If a forensic director at one school can justify to local administrators that other schools have already made tenure-track commitments to their debate and IE programs, an argument may be made to increase funding or positions at his or her home institution.

If members of the forensic community are going to continue to seek support for their speech and debate programs, an understanding of how some administrators view forensics may prove useful. The more information that is available on levels of support and reasons why programs were discontinued, the more able forensic directors will be to shape their arguments in the justification of their programs.

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