Improving Networking between High School and College Forensic Programs

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The concern over the relationship between high school and college forensic programs is not new. In 1989, in a paper for a Conference on Forensic Education, Fritch, Leeper and Rowland wrote, "The key to a strong forensics community lies in the relationships that exist between educators at the two levels. Without a strong tie between collegiate and secondary school educators, the possibility for harmony rapidly dissipates (p. 48)." More than a dozen years later we are faced with that rapidly dissipating harmony. In many cases the relationship between college and high school forensic programs is characterized by a lack of mutual respect and effective communication, among other problems. This is not a healthy relationship for the "forensic community." So the question arises: "Can collegiate and high school forensic programs develop better networks and relationships?" In order for each level to survive and flourish the answer has to be a resounding YES!

High school and collegiate programs share common goals, including—at their best—the underlying mission of providing unique educational and learning opportunities. On both levels, the desire exists to develop or maintain excellent programs that garner recognition, funding and support. The personal satisfaction and the thrill of competition attract competitors and directors in both arenas. But shared goals and perhaps shared motivation does not mean the two levels of programs are identical or in reality, even very similar. In fact, the growing disconnect between high school and collegiate programs may result because such a small percentage of high school programs, those that most closely resemble the college level, directly benefit from the close relationships that currently exist with college programs.

Often high school directors critique collegiate programs for an "elitist" attitude, arguing the valuable interaction provided by summer institutes, quality tournaments hosted on college campuses and extensive assistance in research and coaching is available only to those high school programs with significant financial resources, plus a select number of high school students with exceptional talent.
out a concerted effort to reach a broader audience, the pool of potential recruits for collegiate forensic programs will remain static at best, with limited ethnic or geographic diversity, or diminish.

While not an easy task, outreach programs can be extremely successful. The Urban Debate League, with college involvement, has had tremendous success in expanding forensic opportunities to inner city students, and provides an excellent model that individual events programs could emulate, at least to some degree.

Many high school programs, on the other hand, are accused of "provincialism," rejecting out-of-hand new theories, literature and techniques that work successfully on the collegiate level and "trickle down" into high school event.

It is important to realize that even though members of the same forensic community, most high school programs and the students they serve are very different from college programs and their student population. High school coaches often say college forensics involve risque interpretations. While using material 'on the cutting edge' may be appropriate for college students, it is not acceptable to many of the audiences that see high school performances, including parents, administrators, community judges and younger students. These audiences are crucial for their current and future support of high school programs. Furthermore, many high school contestants lack the maturity to depict scenes from contemporary material with a depth of understanding that creates believability for the audience.

Instances of outraged or offended community members, often played out in local media, do nothing positive for high school programs. There is certainly a wealth of excellent material for interpretative events available that would not provoke such negative responses. College students working with or judging high school competitors need to recognize the importance of standards set either by school personnel, communities or contest rules, and focus on the interpretation and/or performance and not the "shock value" of the material.

High school directors need to provide forensic programs that are meaningful and rewarding to many levels of students, with great disparities in talent, time, and commitment. If colleges, with their expertise, could provide more local, inexpensive, one-day, or weekend workshops, this huge high school population could be reached. One-on-one mentoring in schools close to campus, with students and/or high school directors, could provide a positive image for both programs and a much needed community service.

Another obstacle to developing better relations is that college judges and students who coach high school have received a bad reputation on many high school forensic circuits. Warranted or unwarranted, they are criticized and stereotyped because some members don't dress professionally, they don't act professionally, they don't keep a professional relationship with competitors, they smoke, they curse, and they don't write educational critiques. David Zarefsky points out the problem:

There is the college student, a competitor in forensics, who also coaches and judges for the local high school... One can do both, but one has to keep them straight. The competitive instincts of a coach... may
be at odds with the educational instincts of a teacher. The mindset of a person who has committed himself or herself to forensics as a profession may be quite different from that of the "paraprofessional" who continues to dabble in forensics for a few years while working on a degree... These conflicts pull us in different directions, and the centrifugal forces oppose those which would make us a strong, united community. (1990, p. 23)

From the perspective of the high school director this is a problem, but blaming the college community is not a productive solution. The high schools and the colleges need to work together to provide students with appropriate direction. How does the first year college student learn to judge or coach? No one ever sits them down and teaches them. High school competitors and directors assume that new judges/coaches know how to judge or coach because they competed. The transition from competitor to coach/judge can be difficult. These individuals need to deal with students in a very different way than they interacted with them as peers. High schools and colleges should work together to provide workshops and training sessions for new judges/coaches, to take a positive step toward a solution. This approach would have a good chance to succeed if both the high school and college programs support it.

The problem of using college students as coaches occurs because there aren't enough high school forensic directors. Without directors, programs have to look to the "paraprofessionals" to keep going. Without college students, many programs would fold. Richard Pineda writes in the Rostrum:

Another dilemma occurs when the college student-coach either accepts a role as researcher or falls into a position where they become the major source of team evidence or literature selections and cuttings. Some of the more vocal complaints about college participation in high school forensics stem from this level of involvement. Rather than instructing and teaching high school students how to cut literature, compile debate evidence or find topics for speeches, college student-coaches emphasize a method that creates dependency rather than self-sufficiency. To move beyond this obstacle, it is necessary to direct college-student coaches to become a larger part of the education process and not just to facilitate the means to an end. (2001, p. 24)

It is the responsibility of the college and high school directors to make a concerted effort to recruit more people into the profession. A systematic mentoring program could be developed within geographic regions that would take students in college, pair them with high school directors who mentor them through the first difficult years of "paraprofessional" coaching, and prepare them for a possible career in teaching and coaching. It is in the best interest of both the college and high school program to support and cooperate in such an effort. The college sets up a recruitment network and the high schools get another coach.

Another important issue that should be addressed is that part of the relationship between colleges and high schools is focused on money. The high school programs provide the participants for moneymaking ventures of tournaments and
summer institutes that help support the college programs. This relationship can be problematic. David Zarefsky pointed out that:

Strongly committed college coaches whose schools have weak institutional support for forensics have discovered that they can fund their own programs through a profit-making summer high school institutes... When money becomes the basis for decisions about educational philosophy and goals, or when competition among college programs for the resources of high school students overshadows a recognition of community, we are fragmented and divided against ourselves. (1990, p. 22-23)

High school directors feel the college "profit-making" has a negative impact on the educational values of the forensic activity, when in fact they provide a valuable service. The criticism is that summer institutes seeking consistent or increased enrollment may focus more on winning than learning. To increase entries, college-run tournaments may not enforce the rules of the high school community. Inviting high school directors to be part of the institute staffs, or part of the tab room staffs at a tournament could go a long way in eliminating negative perceptions and promoting an understanding of the mission and purpose of such activities, as well as the real difficulties in making them happen. Evaluations and feedback from high school coaches whose students attend summer institutes could be better utilized. The availability of summer workshop scholarships for both students and directors could be better publicized.

In identifying problems with the relationship between college and high school forensic programs, our purpose is not to tear down this relationship but to strengthen it. Both college and high school programs have a great deal to offer one another. The colleges provide the high schools with coaches, assistant coaches and judges for high school tournaments. Colleges provide a service through their tournaments and summer institutes. Graduate courses offered in forensics are important to high school teachers seeking advanced degrees, required continuing education or movement on their salary schedules.

High schools also have much to offer the college programs, including fertile ground for recruitment. They provide an outlet to help train future directors. High school programs provide opportunities for coaching and judging to students who might otherwise have to get jobs that would interfere with their college forensic schedule. They provide the participants for tournaments and summer institutes that allow colleges to showcase their programs. High schools provide a much-needed outlet for graduate student theory and pedagogical research. But this type of sharing can't happen if the proper networking and communication doesn't exist.

There are many more vehicles that could be available to foster greater opportunities for networking. The Internet can be a valuable tool to disseminate information. Organizations such as state communication associations and coaches' associations could provide space on already existing Web sites to advertise opportunities or develop databases of programs available for college and high school students and directors. Presentations at state and regional conventions or other
yearly meetings might help coordinate efforts to improve networking. High school and college directors could consider writing or co-authoring articles for each other's publications. There are many opportunities that exist to help unite the forensic community. The strength of the community as a whole relies on the cooperation of each level. Directors and students at both the high school and college level need to be committed to improving their relationship. Without such commitment, the whole community will suffer.

References

