Assessing Forensics in the 21st Century: Ten Questions Individual Events Programs Must Address

Andy Billings

First, it is important to indicate my strong support for collegiate individual events. Much like a problematic family member, you can love something and still realize certain faults. At the dawn of a new century, it is important to assess the status of collegiate individual events not only for what we were or what we are, but for what we, as a community, hope to be in the future. In this essay, ten issues within forensics are illuminated. One could argue that these are not the ten most important questions facing the future of forensics. One could even argue whether there are ten issues total that must be addressed. Yet, within these arguments is my integral main point: regardless of where one stands on the issues, an open dialogue about these questions must occur. Hopefully, this essay is a start.

1. How can we accommodate new technology into individual events programs?

Needless to say, the computer-age infiltrates every aspect of our lives. While marginal changes in individual events are because of advances in technology (such as research tools, Internet publishing, and email correspondence with sources), individual events programs have yet to fully embrace technology within competition itself. Students are unable to give platform speeches using PowerPoint; extemporaneous speakers still must create paper files of sources; Lincoln-Douglas debaters continue to perform using legal pads and index cards. Many scholars within the discipline now argue that forensics does not offer the utility it once did, as students are not being trained in advanced technology in the ways they ought to be. Individual events programs must find ways to widen the opportunity for cutting edge technology within the preparation and performance of an event. While the occasional platform speaker will be found wheeling a television and VCR into a round, this hardly seems to be a trend that the majority of speech participants find to be practical. To avoid being seen as "old school" or impractical, the activity must embrace, rather than ignore, technological advancements.

2. Should unpublished interpretation pieces be regulated?

Oral interpretation has always been an easy target for critics of individual

Andrew C. Billings (Ph.D., Indiana University, 1999) is an assistant professor and Director of Forensics at Clemson University. His forensic research interests lie in the areas of after-dinner speaking, interpretation, and gender communication.

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events. Many regard it as easier or inferior to public address events because the student does not have to create the actual script, nor are they required to perform without the script in hand. Even supporters of oral interpretation find two sharp criticisms: (1) students too often choose literature of poor quality, and (2) oral interpretation performances often bastardize the integrity of the material for better dramatic and technical effect (Holloway, Allen, Barr, Colley, Keefe, Pearse, and St. Clair, 1983).

Both of these critiques directly relate to the subject of unpublished literature. While exact percentages are not yet known, it is clear that many students and coaches write their own material for oral interpretation competition. They do so for three reasons: (1) it saves them the hassle of searching and cutting an already published selection, (2) it nullifies the "it's been done five years ago" comment, and (3) it works. Koeppel and Mormon (1991) argue that the interpreter should serve as the creator of the character, with the top goal being to emphasize ideas that "can be viewed as the communicative or rhetorical feature of the literature" (p. 144). Unpublished literature appears to undermine both of these goals, as students and coaches create their own ideas and characters without an original text to use as a guide. While one could easily argue that unpublished literature teaches other skills (most notably writing and plot formation), the skills are inherently different.

Considering the increased use of the Internet as a publication venue, the regulation of student/coach-written scripts cannot possibly be achieved. However, unpublished literature still is the dark, hidden secret of individual events competition. Opponents of this practice argue that solutions do exist; yet most proposed solutions seem implausible. First, judges could drop their obsession with avoiding scripts that were done years ago. This is not likely to happen, yet, considering the fact that many people resort to unpublished literature because everything "good" has already been done, it would definitely help to alleviate the perceived problem. Others have proposed set lists of scripts in which the student must choose. However, from a judges' point-of-view, the thought of seeing a 42nd performance of *Agnes of God* may seem repulsive.

Verlinden (1987) writes that "the way oral interpretation is presented in forensics is important because so many students have their first or only exposure to the art in forensics" (p. 57). Students who perform unpublished literature are gaining art skills in the form of writing, but they are not gaining exposure to the mainstream literary world. As unpublished interpretation increasingly becomes an issue, the forensics community must address these separate and unequal skills.

### 3. Is Lincoln-Douglas debate an individual event?

Nothing dichotimizes individual event participants more than Lincoln-Douglas debate. Students who compete in the event often refer to other individual events as inferior; many students who do not compete in L-D harbor strong negative feelings regarding its inclusion. Since becoming an NFA standard in the early 1990s, participation in L-D Debate has steadily increased. Still, Lincoln-Douglas debate is not included in overall team sweeps placings, with the top-five Lincoln
Douglas schools instead receiving awards in a separate national championship. Proponents argue that Lincoln-Douglas debate diversifies the individual event options even further by allowing for on-the-spot argumentation. Opponents counter that the structure (other individual events do not require counterstrategy depending on opponent), time limits (42 minutes when no other individual event is more than ten), and presence of other debate outlets (NDT, CEDA, Parliamentary) make including Lincoln-Douglas debate within individual events an unwise decision.

Many research articles regarding Lincoln Douglas have been publishing in the *National Forensic Journal* (most recently: Abrams & Novak, 1997; Shelton and Patterson, 1997). The fall 1996 issue of *National Forensic Journal* even devoted an entire issue to the issues related to Lincoln-Douglas Debate. However, rarely has discussion focused on what the real issue appears to be: should Lincoln-Douglas debate be an official tenth NFA event? If so, how can this form of debate gain acceptance within the entire forensic community? Williams (1996) is the only known scholar to address how Lincoln-Douglas fits within the scheme of other individual events. Williams writes: "The delivery skills prevalent in public address are typically not found in debate. The individual events student who begins competing in L-D will benefit from the need to prepare speeches, or cases, that will be thoroughly critiqued within the competition" (p. 60).

The need for a different type of argumentation skill within individual events certainly can be articulated (Bartanen, 1981). Still, L-D has thus far been satisfied with being fragmented from other N.F.A. events, rightly for fear of backlash from a large segment of the forensic community which hopes to keep debate separate from individual events. In the future, both L-D debate supporters and opponents will have to take a "sink-or-swim" mindset. As it currently stands, the placement of Lincoln-Douglas debate within the N.F.A. schema is murky at best.

4. How can individual events avoid reliance on a "success formula" that stifles creativity?

The first day that one of my students joins the team, they receive a forty-page booklet that explains the events. They are told to treat it as their forensic Bible. The booklet does not merely tell the students what the events are; it also tells students the hidden secrets for success. In essence, they are formulas.

Everyone hates the word "formula" when constructing an individual event. Formulas stifle creativity, often reducing the preparation of an event to a mechanical process. The only thing people hate more than the discussion of these formulas is the fact that they work. Students resist becoming indoctrinated within the success formula mind-set, but then proceed to apply the same formulas when they are judging and coaching post-graduation. It's an endless cycle based on the notion that there has to be a "right" and a "wrong" way for doing things.

Forensics proponents often argue that a great appeal of the activity is its diverse styles and tastes, but the bottom line is that people strive to find a success formula—for no other reason than that if there is a success formula, an ardent student can certainly follow it. Ask any person within forensics how long a "teaser" is and they will likely give the same response: approximately 45 seconds. How
many main points in any platform speech? Three. Always. There are countless rules for competition that create competitive "in" and "out" groups. Successful programs can be defined by who knows the unwritten rules and who does not. Releasing ourselves from success formulas is something that many know would be best for the creativity of individual events, but successful programs will likely fight to keep the formulas in tact. And why wouldn't they? Following the formulas virtually ensures competitive success. In the future, forensics must find ways to work outside of our self-inflicted box. If we don't, the applicability of the skills we claim to be teaching may not truly connect to the outside world.

5. Will the season ever be shortened?

The tournaments start in September and end with Interstate at the end of April. Seven and a half months of unregulated I.E. excitement. Most people know the season is too long, seeing as the I.E. season is longer than the college football and basketball seasons combined. Yet, because it would likely cause changes in the A.F.A. qualifying system and uproot other forensic schedules, directors of forensics embark on this seven and a half month odyssey with the belief that "there's nothing I can do about it." Students quit because they are not willing to make speech their entire college experience; quality coaches "retire" in their twenties because they cannot handle the strain; marriages end because coaches are never home. Granted, it wouldn't be easy to shorten the season (to say, five or six months), but it may be something the forensic community should pursue.

The first consideration should be the educational value of the activity. If students are competing the entire school year, when do they have the time to stop and learn the basics, let alone improve upon past performances? Students often know their events could be better, but they don't have time to stop and improve them because the next tournament is already around the corner. Educationally, this is a nightmare of a scenario. Clearly supporters of the current system can say that if a program doesn't like the length of the season, they can always start late. In reality, everyone knows that if students were competing in their first tournament in November against other students who already have eight tournaments under their belt, the program will be left scrambling to catch up the rest of the season.

A second major consideration for shortening the season would be from a financial standpoint. Programs constantly display woe at their miniscule budgets. While funding of forensic programs will always be a top concern, perhaps the budgets would last longer if programs weren't traveling the entire academic year. I recently had a conversation with a Director of Forensics who stated they can barely make it on the budget they have. He then told me that they have traveled to 38 tournaments over 20 different weekends. The parallel would seem obvious, and yet many programs are not making the connection.

Many other reasons for shortening the current season (judge burn-out, watered-down competition, unbalanced priorities between forensics and school) could all be addressed. The bottom line is that most of the community knows the season is too long. In the 21st century, the question will be whether anyone does anything about it.
6. How can forensics recruit more qualified Judges?

No subject area of forensics has been dissected by forensic scholars as much as judging criteria. The famous 1-6 ranking combination makes coaches and competitors wonder what judging paradigms are being implemented. Many studies have analyzed the need for judging paradigms from after-dinner speaking (Billings, 1997; Mills, 1984) to oral interpretation (Mills, 1991) to Lincoln-Douglas debate (Minch & Borchers, 1996). However, as Mills (1983) points out, "no discussion of judging criteria could be complete without examining the problems presented by hired judges" (p. 29). Still, the difference between an incompetent hired judge and a hired judge who may assess a performance differently from others must be articulated. Diversity in opinions is the reason for having multiple rounds of competition. However, individual event programs must work harder to provide judges who have justified diverse opinions. As forensics digs deeper and deeper into judging pools, the same judges often watch the same performances numerous times in a given season (or even weekend). The obvious first solution is that host schools must have increased judging support from departmental faculty. Yet, with participating schools providing fewer and fewer judges of their own, the strain to find anyone with a pulse, pen, and stopwatch becomes greater. The N.F.A. decision to waive the previously-required college degree criteria at the national level underscores the fact that the individual event community is increasingly willing to take anyone who is willing to judge. While no one can critique decisions to lower judging standards because they are necessary to keep tournaments staffed, the fact is that quality judges are a dying breed. Forensics is based upon the principle that the best speaker wins. With judges admitting they "didn't know what to look for" (Mills, 1983), this basic principle most likely is not being fulfilled with any sense of regularity.

7. How can scholarly forensic research be increased?

The core of the perceived lack of credibility of forensics within the communication discipline concerns the lack of research development in the past ten years. The National Forensic Journal began publication in 1983, with the goal of producing two issues of solid forensic research each year. Currently, NFJ struggles to be published once per year, with an entire three-year gap in publications from 1992-1995. The Forensic was recently published containing just one ten-page article. This is not the result of poor editorial leadership or inept management; it is an indication of the lack of quality research being conducted in the forensic arena. Former NFJ editor Halford Ryan wrote of his four years as editor that "many essays were not satisfactorily composed" and that many contributors "routinely made egregious errors in English composition" (p. 76). This may not be the result of ignorance, but rather the result of an activity that does not encourage scholarly research. Considering the skills the forensic community displays in speeches, directors of forensics and other forensic minds clearly are capable of superior scholarly work. Yet, many people willing to conduct research have not had the necessary training on how to do scholarly research well, likely the result of the fact that we are entering a second generation of forensics coaches who have not conducted
regular research. Current directors of forensics often argue that hectic travel schedules and teaching demands make conducting scholarly work impossible. That most likely is true. However, forensics programs in the coming years will be forced to find ways to raise the amount and quality of research being produced. If not, forensics will likely continue to be the ugly stepchild of the communication discipline.

8. In the age of the Internet, how can forensics enforce unethical and unverifiable source citations?

Forensics in the 21st century has new, adapted terminology. In platform speeches, the term "cite count" is now a powerful ranking force. Whereas a typical persuasive speech in the 1990s could be considered highly researched with eight sources, that same speech would be considered lightweight today. Platform speeches have begun an era in which the twenty-source speech is becoming commonplace. What's more, many judges are rewarding these speeches which often are nothing more than collected strings of newbytes with intermittent transitions. This, coupled with the "it's been done" comment about most every speech topic, has forced platform speeches into the fringes. Students stretch topics to make them seem new and earth-shattering, while stretching the boundaries of what constitutes a good source and what the sources are actually saying. The result? Ethical lines have been blurred.

Cronn-Mills & Schnoor (2000) analyzed the 1999 A.F.A. informative final, finding potential ethical violations in all six of the speeches. This study pointed out that this particular A.F. A. final was not likely an anomaly. Students with only one future implication of their informative topic are told they must have three; the second and third future implications get fudged a little. A persuasive speaker is told that they must have a national solution to their proposed problem; a source citation on the topic morphs into a "call for action" on the national level.

Lexus-Nexus provides students with bountiful resources, but does a cite from a editorial in the New Straits Times really warrant inclusion in a persuasive speech on an American issue? Students have now been told to "dig" for more variety in research, resulting in the citation of biased Web sites and email correspondences with corporate summer interns. Judges cannot discern between the credible and plausibly fictional, so they tend to let ethical concerns slide. In the 21st century, as this line continues to get blurred, solutions must be proposed.

First, judges must pay increasing attention to the quality of the source that is being cited. A judge who is a conscientious critic can alter the activity in many positive ways. Additionally, judges must drop the notion of "cite counts" and, in turn, substitute it with focus on argumentation. A speech with twenty sources is not inherently bad, but it's also not inherently better than a speech on the same topic with eight sources. Counting citations is the judges' easy way out. Evaluating citations is what all judges should strive to achieve. Finally, national forensic organizations must establish guidelines for the citation of sources. This can be done. The National Forensic Association's recent guidelines in regard to electronic correspondences in Lincoln-Douglas debate evidence is proof of that. Enforcing proper citation guidelines will be no picnic for anyone involved. However, failure
to address the growing ethical dilemmas in regard to course citation may denigrate the entire activity.

9. Can college forensics develop better networks with high school programs?

The naive forensics coach could assume that building a successful individual events program requires little to no recruiting skills, guessing that whoever simply walks through the door on call-out night will be molded into a national finalist. The experienced forensics coach knows better. Top-notch college programs often have "feeder schools," high schools in which students naturally flow into a certain college program. Building a rapport with local high schools, can not be overrated. Yet, beyond the seemingly artificial relationship that accrues through recruiting, high school and college forensics programs do not always like each other very much. High school coaches often say college forensics involves risque interp and too many platform speeches. College directors often take the attitude with incoming freshmen that "sure, you may have done this for four years in high school, but now we're going to show you how to really do it right." Several authors (Brand, 1996; Snider, 1994) have argued that outreach with high school programs needs to improve and have provided guidelines for common ground that can be established. Still, many directors of forensics see having a rapport with high schools as a "necessary evil." Until that changes, high school and college programs will continue to function separately—without the help they could and should be giving to one another.

10. Can forensics help to alleviate coaching burnout?

It's the battle the majority of forensics coaches face. You love the students, but.... You love the activity, but.... There's something that keeps coaches from wanting to make a career out of forensics. Many reasons for this battle (lack of respect within the communication discipline, length of season) have already been discussed. However, the burnout factor applies to more than merely the amount of travel and tournaments. Many coaches have the title of "Director of Forensics," yet receive no course release for their involvement. Others may be released from coursework, but find that their team of twenty people is currently preparing five events apiece. Suddenly, the coach is faced with working on 100 events at once—a daunting task to say the least.

Beyond the fact that coaches rarely stay in the activity for the extent of their career, forensics, as a whole, suffers from a lack of leadership. Granted, there are excellent educators who do a strong job locally and nationally, but they are often required to lead and/or work with several different organizations at once because so many programs are in a state of transition. When I coached in the state of Indiana, over half of the leadership of the forensics programs in the state would change from year to year. Without better stability, current forensic leaders become overburdened in their attempts to do it all, making the activity increasingly unhealthy. Coaching burnout could be addressed in countless ways, but there is no easy answer to this one. Still, a list such as this one would not be complete without men-
tioning this issue that so closely relates to leadership and the entire stability of the individual event framework.

References


