Coroners, We Are Not: Getting the Word Out Through Publicity and Recruitment

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Abstract

Describing and characterizing a well established Aristotelian term like "forensics" offers the possibility of sharing a rich pedagogical tradition, one that works toward enhancing our collective ability to communicate with one another. Essential to the health of this tradition is the promotion of what we do. Getting the word out about co-curricular forensics activities involves garnering publicity for our endeavors and attracting other engaged students to participate in these activities. By elaborating different ways of getting the word out, this essay develops three values, accessibility, community, and involvement, which characterize the process of garnering effective publicity and recruitment.

One question from the uninitiated that has become a well-worn joke implicates frequent confusion about the meaning of "forensics." Many of us on the "circuit" have fielded various renditions of this question such as "Do you investigate dead people?" "Do you practice lab science?" and "Is that like on C.S.I."

The question is both unfortunate and potentially productive. It reflects how, in a culture dominated by intercollegiate athletics, co-curricular competition in debate and IE (another term that requires explanation) usually resides in the shadows of football, basketball, and even field hockey. Nevertheless, explaining the etymology of a well established Aristotelian term like "forensics" offers the possibility of sharing a rich pedagogical tradition, one that works toward enhancing our collective ability to communicate with one another. Essential to the health of this tradition is our promotion of what we do, how it's done, and why we do it. Forensics attracts students who are talented, curious, reflective, and creative, and it is important that their efforts are appreciated by others. Getting the word out involves garnering publicity for these endeavors, which fosters attracting other engaged students into these activities.

Seeking publicity for an emergent forensics program demands attention to three values that characterize what we do: accessibility, community, and involvement. These values position forensics programs to grow, gain greater respect, and encourage others to get involved. The first step to garnering recognition is to be in and at those places where people will look. In other words, your program should be accessible to those who are looking for you. Every team that I have worked with has included students who sought us out on their own. How did these industrious students do this? They searched for us on the web, they contacted related academic departments, and they went to student organization or activities offices on campus. Generating a web site from scratch may sound like an arduous task, but it can benefit a start-up program in innumerable ways. Check to see if your university or college offers server allotment for co-curricular organ...
izations like your program. If it doesn't, check to see if an academic program or department will sponsor you if only to the extent of getting an "edu" address for your program. Once you have attained some space on the web, do a search for other programs and check out their sites. Ask yourself the kinds of questions you'll need to tackle: How do they characterize their program? What kinds of audiences are addressed? How are the site's links organized? What kind of relationship to the university is projected? You should also seek out programs at colleges close to you. Ask your peers how they use their web sites or why they haven't (yet) produced one. I have used the web to offer not only contact and meeting information (where we're located on campus, where and when and how often we meet), but also to promote our accomplishments and justify our role on campus. Your web site can address not only current, past, and potential team members but also those who are simply curious about what you do. For those folks looking for you, the web will inevitably be one of the first places they will search.

There are two other important resources that ensure your accessibility. First, develop a relationship with an academic program that will appreciate what you do. If you derive your funding in this way, then you're probably in good shape. If you instead get funding from a variety of sources related to student activity fees, it is still important to be recognized and appreciated by like departments oriented around rhetoric, speech, communication(s), and/or theatre. A department may not only field inquiries about your presence on campus, it also might constitute a source for help with recruiting. Contact instructors of public speaking and let them know that you're interested in referrals, students who might benefit from the resources offered by this activity. Building good bonds between curricular programs and co-curricular activities like yours that reflect their values and offer a venue for experiential learning can produce mutual benefits for each other. Also be sure that your program is registered with your campus's office of student activities or organizations. At many schools, all student organizations get listed on the web; your listing could be hyperlinked to your new web site providing another means of access. Likewise, at many schools, offices devoted to student activities offer promotional opportunities for upcoming events and organize fairs that promote student organizations at the beginning of the school year. For those people seeking you out, a student activities office is a logical place to start.

Once you have planted the seeds that ensure your accessibility, it is time to become more proactive and establish a positive presence in your campus and civic communities. Remember those relationships you developed with departments and public speaking instructors in particular? See which instructors are interested in having your students speak, debate, or perform for various classes. Impromptu and extemporaneous speaking are often popular, for example, along with basic speech genres such as informative and persuasive. Peers who demonstrate public speaking in class can offer a valuable complement to watching famous speeches from the past on video. In addition to classroom participation, consider organizing events on campus such as public debates of exigent issues and showcase performances for not only your campus but also the community at large. Some instructors might offer extra credit to students who attend these
events. These events not only offer the opportunity to generate publicity for what you do, they also give your students new contexts and audiences for their own speeches and performances. In addition to performances, you and/or your students also could pursue instructional roles that generate positive recognition. Consider organizing workshops devoted to reducing communication apprehension or preparing for job interviews. Students involved in your program also could pursue related activities such as poetry slams or a speakers' corner on campus devoted to discussing issues of the day. Finding ways to give back to your community can not only get more students involved and aware of what you do, but also generate press coverage and positive word of mouth around campus and the community.

When you establish a strong role in your community, you begin to assert positions of leadership and involvement. In particular, consider your program's relationship to and involvement in other publicity-generating organizations such as the campus newspaper, yearbook, and student government. At Indiana University, the program has benefited from students who have excelled in these activities. We have had stories recounting state and national tournaments as well as tournaments we have hosted on campus placed prominently in the campus newspaper. Sometimes, these stories get reproduced in the paper's welcome back edition targeted to incoming students at the beginning of the school year. We also were the subject of a feature article that spanned several pages in a recent yearbook because of student involvement. When a member of our team was elected student body president, his identity as a leader of the team also was noted frequently. This kind of free press often engenders itself. Write your own press releases after significant tournaments and events and place them on your team's web site. Better yet, appoint or elect a student to be the team's PR officer and have that person direct attention to these press releases and events. Once your newspaper or yearbook has validated your program's achievements, you may be surprised at how this attention can snowball. During my first year coaching at Bradley University, I saw how our "Night Before Nationals" showcase performances had become a campus tradition that had expanded to several nights, packed audiences, and attention from not only the campus newspaper but also the city's as well. Generating and growing free press like this can be much more compelling than simply placing—and paying for—advertising that gets buried on the inside pages.

In addition to getting involved in your campus and civic communities, consider how to get recognition in high school forensics communities as well. One of the most compelling sources of recruiting is the high school "pipeline," those students who already know forensics to an extent and are eager to continue participating in college. The biggest and most successful programs recruit from this pipeline aggressively, particularly those that offer scholarship assistance. No matter your program's size and resources, however, you can take steps in this direction. Although they can become large endeavors that require a lot of time, consider hosting a high school tournament or summer camp on campus. Seek out your school's office of admissions and offices devoted to summer programs and
recruitment. My experiences in this regard have varied, but you may find that your school is eager to help with both financial and people resources. Try to use these opportunities to get to know high school coaches as well. Learn about how they approach the activity, what values they try to impart to their students, and how they coach and manage their own programs. One concern on the minds of both high school and college coaches is how students who are motivated to continue competing adapt to this transition. It won't take long for high school coaches to recognize and appreciate your interest in how students grow and adjust to intercollegiate forensics. Like with the public speaking instructors, referrals in this regard can be fruitful and enduring.

Getting the word out and generating publicity is not always easy and demands time and effort. Like anything else with a start-up program, however, it can be extremely rewarding. It also will become much easier if you sow the kinds of seeds that perpetuate their own publicity and recruiting. By making your presence known and accessible to outsiders, playing a positive role and contributing to your various communities, and then getting more involved in related organizations and contexts, you can generate the kind of recognition that not only feeds good recruiting, but also provides the kind of respect and appreciation that your students deserve. People should know that enhancing communication is what you and your program are all about, not seeing dead people.