Building Relationships with Administration
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Abstract

Based on discussions with other coaches, administrators, as well as personal experience, this article focuses on how to build and maintain a healthy forensic program through relationship development with administrators of colleges or universities. Concepts of getting to know the administration, getting the team involved to provide service, publicizing awards, and offering administrators the opportunity for involvement, are explored as criteria for optimal program atmosphere.

Student housing on campus is a huge challenge for many schools with over crowded dorms. Housing programs that might not fall within the declarations of departmental functions proves even more challenging. For this reason, forensic programs have been housed in different areas on campuses throughout the years. Some have found homes in Student Affairs, Student Government Associations, and some are simply students who don't have an established program but fund themselves so they may experience the world of Forensics. Many programs do exist in a more traditional environment within the walls of a Communication Department. No matter where we keep our extemp files and interp folders, we must establish relationships with all levels of administrators to ensure our stability and growth. Sounds easy, of course; communication is the key. But, knowing just what the "right" communication is can be perplexing. Just like filling a prescription, the doctor (coach) must provide the patient (administrators) with the correct medicine with accurate dosage. It must be the perfect treatment. No matter to whom you report, administrators have different and varied opinions about forensics, which makes creating our prescription challenging. Sadly, our community has seen many programs eliminated when a new dean or department chairperson with a lack of knowledge about forensics wants to cut budgets. We have also seen new programs blossom when a supportive administrator steps forward. Thus, the goals of the institution and the goals of administrators have a definite impact on forensics.

If you are establishing a new program, you have the advantage to create your desired image with administration. But, no matter if you are establishing a new program or a new coach in an existing program, the first step is get to know your administration from the ground up.

Administration

Getting to know administrators may take some time depending upon the size of your school and the administrator's availability. However, some time invested in the beginning can open the door to insights on how to achieve what you want and develop positive relationships between the team and the administration. Stepping into an already existing program offers many challenges as well
as opportunities. Create your own image and don't rely on hearsay from outgoing coaches or current team members. You can strengthen the bond with an already supportive administrator or turn the head of a less supportive administrator to become an ally.

Begin by making appointments starting at the bottom. Meet with your department chairperson. This should be the easiest as he/she was probably on your hiring committee and most likely already has a positive impression. Even though you may have discussed your expertise, teaching styles, and goals, it helps to refresh and remind this administrator why you were chosen. In many colleges the upward structure might include the Department Chairperson, Division Chairperson, Dean, Academic Vice-President/Provost, and President. Smaller institutions may have fewer administrators, larger ones may have more. Be open about your intentions of getting to know the different levels of administrators to assure open communication lines. Above all, make sure you don't bypass people in decision making positions. Take one level at a time to ensure everyone is in the loop.

A few recommendations for discussions include; always be upbeat and positive about the advantages of forensics and how forensics can benefit the university. Know what functions your team fulfills; academic, extra-curricular, and/or recruitment. Explain how your team will meet these through sharing short range and long range goals. Offer suggestions on how the team can help to create a positive image for the department as well as the university.

Campus and Community Involvement

Creating a positive image on campus has a positive impact on administration. Find out what activities are already available in which the team may participate. One of these activities simply could be having the team help with freshmen move-in day, which is also a great recruitment tool. Some colleges have extensive Welcome Week or Orientation activities which could benefit by the creative energies of your team. The second semester is a great time to prepare a performance for the university community which includes prepared events, public speaking and interpretive events. Performances can be scheduled through Lecture/Performance or Convocation Committees, Student Government Associations, Greek organizations, your department or simply through the efforts of the team. The students enjoy the opportunity to perform for their peers and administration recognizes the gift to the college community. From a coaching perspective, this offers a great practice opportunity prior to state or national tournaments. Some schools encourage off campus services through community programs or high schools. Many teams work with local high schools, coaching students, judging high school tournaments and even hosting a high school tournament. Offer to the administration performances at any of their functions. These may include other organizations such as performances at the Optimists Club Luncheon or judging the American Legion Oratorical Contest. These services can establish positive relationships with colleagues and administrators and offer opportunities for students to get recognized by leaders in the community.
Information Dissemination

Once you have established a relationship with administrators, keep them informed. If you have a university intranet or campus wide e-mail system, post individual and team successes. Make the most out of every set of tournament results by posting on the services available to you. Send out notifications to the students' hometown newspapers as well. Most institutions have some type of media relations department that will do this for you if you provide the information. However, since you are dealing with people with their own agendas, releasing this information may become less prioritized, especially with schools that push athletics as the recruitment and publicity medium. Be prepared to send out your own press releases. This process can be one of your strongest mechanisms for creating a positive image with your administration. Students who are recognized by their hometown newspapers get more enthused about the activity, willing to give more of themselves. Their parents, armed with bragging rights, become enthused about their child's participation, spreading the word of their positive experience under your leadership. Parents can become a powerful force. If you find this task overwhelming with an already overloaded schedule, get the team to help. A Public Relations or Journalism major is perfect for this assignment. Also, if you receive copies of the articles, forward them on. All of the articles might not get read in detail by upper administrators, but the reminder that the team is in the newspaper keeps your team in the positive image of the administration.

Forensic, Administrative and Community Outreach

If your team doesn't belong to one of the national organizations yet, make sure you get this done. They all have benefits; you just must decide which ones best suit your team's needs. Any participation and/or success at national tournaments make great public relations opportunities. In 1990, University of Indianapolis was on the brink of losing university funding. A first place finish in President's Division III at NFA provided the university with its first national title in any activity. Instead of losing the program, the budget was quadrupled the next year. The utilization of publicity and recruitment by the school was extensive and proved successful.

Hosting a tournament offers optimal positive use of administrators. Addressing an opening assembly, awards assembly, or handing out awards are easy yet positive tasks. The amount of time donated is minimal and creates a positive image for that administrator. Don't be surprised if some even like to judge. My department chairperson has judged our individual events and state tournaments for years. Several years ago, I had a dean who hosted the High School Shakespeare Contest on our campus and had been a debater in college. He enjoyed the opportunity to judge individual events, and in turn, I was a judge for his Shakespeare competition.

If the program is under scrutiny or the possibility of being cut, ask for help. Many directors have written letters to administrators at other schools in support
of that particular program and/or coach. This probably won't save a program but this can aid in the development of a program and the image of the coach. A simple note of thanks by another coach to your administrator for a deed a coach or team member has performed reinforces the belief that you and your team are well respected by your peers.

It would be easy if there was an easy 1, 2, 3 step program to establish positive relationships with administration. Unfortunately, we deal with individuals with various personalities and agendas. Thus, we can only evaluate our individual situations and make choices that we believe will help our programs thrive. Basic suggestions are: get to know your administrators, offer your team as a service for the university, publicize individual and team successes, and be open for involvement by administrators. Rely on your own instincts, be creative and thorough and you'll provide a strong foundation for your forensics home.