INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

A System for Evaluating Forensic Participation for Academic Credit

CAROLYN KEEFE*

During the 1960s when every educational practice was fair game for student activists, the grading system was roundly attached as archaic, subjective, counterproductive, and unreliable in predicting occupational success. Calls for completely ridding academia of the intimidating pest were urgent. From the protest came minor reforms such as the pass-fail option, contract grading, and "F" removal plans. Yet by 1976, according to Alexander Astin, famed for his longitudinal studies of college students, only a small minority endorsed the abolition of grades.¹ Today what Ohmer Milton has labeled the "symbol scramble"² is still the major form of competition on college and university campuses.

No matter how forensic educators regard the scramble for grades, as soon as their institutions grant credit for participation in forensics, they must find or develop a way to assess student achievement. But this is not an easy process. In a study involving 130 coaches from programs affiliated with the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament, Robert Littlefield found that how to evaluate students in the participation course was the most frequently indicated "content" problem.³ Considering the nature of forensics, this response is not surprising.

Three reasons, in particular, contribute to the difficulty of grading students who take forensics for credit. First, the range of learning experiences under the aegis of forensics is broad and varied. At one end is the commonality of tournament competition, but at the other end might be team community service, fund raising, or coaching student government candidates. In-between lie all the preparatory and leadership activities that comprise an active program. The problem is: Which of all the possible categories of student behavior should be selected as indicative of student achievement in fulfilling the educational goals of forensics?


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Second, when the credit is offered under an arrangement other than the formal classroom, several of the traditional bases for grading — among them attendance, class participation, and tests — need modification or substitution. Audience ratings on speeches delivered at community service clubs, for instance, may be one basis for a student's grade. Habitual approaches to grading prove unworkable.

Third, many student behaviors that are amenable to evaluation occur in settings that cannot be observed directly by the forensic educator who is responsible for assigning a grade. For example, when a student is participating in rounds, that person's coach is usually judging members of other teams. Furthermore, several coaches, none of whom enter the semester grade, may work with a student. This means that the grading system must provide for data collection from all those who have the opportunity to make critical observations.

The diversity and various settings of forensics create conditions that call for unorthodox approaches to grading the participation course. Help in this direction has been meager from the forensic community. As far as the author has been able to discover, apart from the Littlefield study and a brief version of this present article, the matter has not been treated in the literature.

This overdue discussion will show how one university approaches the problem of grading forensics. It is hoped that the description will guide those who have never developed an evaluation procedure for such a purpose and will challenge those who want to redesign their current practices.

BACKGROUND ON THE FORENSIC PROGRAM
The school in question is West Chester University of Pennsylvania where the forensic program subscribes unequivocally to the position articulated by the two landmark forensic colloquies. The 1974 National Developmental Conference on Forensics stated: The primary function of the forensics educator is to teach students—to help them develop skills, to cultivate high ethical and scholarly standards, and to establish a climate in which students have an exciting and enjoyable intellectual and social experience.

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4Carolyn Keefe, "A System for Evaluating Tournament Competition for Academic Credit" (Bethesda, Md.: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 264 606, 1986). Minor changes have been made in the rating forms since this paper was published.

This view was reiterated and expanded ten years later by the delegates meeting in Evanston at the 1984 National Developmental Conference on Forensics. They specified the purposes of forensics as the development of basic intellectual skills and attitudes through training in a) research, analysis, and critical thinking skills, b) oral communication, and c) interdisciplinary fields. As such, forensics provides a foundation for future careers and a method of self-development and social interaction.6

The forensic program at West Chester University has always emphasized the dual purposes struck in these statements, that is, the development of both the intellectual and social skills of the student. Three faculty coaches, as well as approximately five varsity members, guide the participants in research, analysis, speech composition, and practice speaking. Most of the coaching takes the form of tutorials, but during the week prior to a given tournament, one or two group coaching sessions are held. At these sessions, all the attendants have the opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. Additionally, some coaching and an occasional workshop are provided by forensic alumni. Thus growth in intellectual and communicative abilities is the direct concern of everyone connected with West Chester University.

Although social skills are fostered by the numerous intra- and inter-squad communication exchanges, team management affords a deliberative training ground for personal development. Annually seven officers—about one-third of the team—are elected, three as Forensic Society leaders and four to represent the Pennsylvania Iota Chapter of Pi Kappa Delta. These students, some who are office holders for the first time, work in conjunction with the Director of Forensics in choosing tournaments, allocating funds, keeping financial records, enforcing the Forensic Society Constitution and disciplining offenders, directing and judging the semi-annual basic speech contest, recruiting and auditioning prospective members, fund raising, running an intercollegiate novice tournament, speaking to community groups, judging service club speech contests, and planning the annual party. These activities encompass the entire school year and involve all members of the team in one way or another.

COMPONENTS OF THE EVALUATION SYSTEM

The evaluation system was designed by the author to incorporate the Forensic Society goals. Gronlund points out that measuring

outcomes in the areas of skills (such as speaking and oral reading) and social attitudes is difficult with the usual paper-and-pen testing. Generally, however, these outcomes can be evaluated through observational techniques, peer-appraisals, and self-reports. The West Chester system utilizes all these methods in four rating sheets.

Credit for participation in forensics is granted under the rubric of SPC 399: Directed Studies in Speech Communication. At the outset of the semester, each student enrolled in the course receives a memo explaining the grading system. It specifies that the final grade will be based upon ratings from the student himself or herself, the student's coach(es), Executive Board team members (the seven officers), and the Director of Forensics. The student will provide a self-evaluation on four criteria: 1) Interest in Personal Development, 2) Attitude toward Forensic Participants, 3) Support of Team Activities, and 4) Tournament Success. The coach(es) will rate the student on the first criterion, Executive Board team members on the second criterion, and the Director of Forensics on the third and fourth criteria. The memo further stipulates that the rating from each rating form will carry a 25 percent weight.

The Self-Appraisal Rating Form (see Form 1) is the first component in the system. It displays a criteria rating scale linking a value term with each of four numbers that correspond from high to low with the grades A, B, C, and D: 8 excellent; 6 good; 4 fair; and 2 poor. Furthermore, the form lists the behaviors and products subsumed under the four criteria on which the rating is to be based. Interest in Personal Development is seen as initiative in finding new material and doing research, willingness to try new events (over required number), dependability in keeping coaching appointments, preparation for coaching time, and rehearsing before events. Attitude toward Forensic Participants includes friendliness toward own and other team members, helping team members with events, and attending rounds of team members. Support of Team Activities is shown by serving on Executive Board, attendance at Forensic Society meetings, support of fund raising, and judging or control room work for speech contest and novice tournament, and community service. Tournament Success is defined as ranks and ratings at tournaments and improvement in competence. After

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SELF-APPRAISAL RATING FORM FOR STUDENT

APPRAISER

Criteria Rating Scale: 8 excellent; 6 good; 4 fair; 2 poor
Total Points: 28-32=A; 20-27=B; 12-19=C; 4-11=D

In the space under each criterion, explain your rating number. No points will be calculated into your grade without this explanation.

POINTS CRITERIA

1. Interest in Personal Development: initiative in finding new material and doing research, willingness to try new events (over required number), dependability in keeping coaching appointments, preparation for coaching time, rehearsing before events.

2. Attitude toward Forensic Participants: friendliness toward own and other team members, helping team members with events, attending rounds of team members.

3. Support of Team Activities: serving on Executive Board, attendance at Forensic Society meetings, support of fund raising, judging or control room work for speech contest and novice tournament, community

4. Tournament Success: ranks and ratings at tournaments, improvement in competence.

TOTAL POINTS GRADE
assigning to each criterion a point value that must be justified, the self-rater adds the numbers and registers a grade according to the total point range shown on the form.

The second component takes the form of a memo (see Form 2) from the Director of Forensics to each of the student's coaches who is asked to rate the student on Interest in Personal Development. Here again the behaviors for the criterion are specified and the same numerical rating scale is used. Space is provided for the coach to justify his or her rating.

Input from team members is provided on the third form (see Form 3). Approximately two weeks before the end of the semester, each member of the Executive Board receives a rating sheet from the Director of Forensics. The behaviors constituting Attitude toward Forensic Participants appear on the sheet, along with the adopted point range. Below this material is a three-column grid headed by "Points," "Names," and "Comments: Please justify your ratings." The officer then fills out the sheet and returns it to the Director of Forensics by the specified date. The points assigned to each student are added, and the mean is calculated to determine the grade on this criterion.

Lastly, the Director of Forensics completes the evaluation process by filling out sheet number four. Like the other forms, this one displays the rating scale, the appropriate criteria and subsumed behaviors, and space for justifying the assigned ratings. At the bottom of the page, the evaluator enters the total points, the mean, and the resultant grade. (See Form 4)

In order to provide feedback for the student, a grade summary sheet is mailed to him or her. It reminds the recipient of the earlier memo concerning the grading system and then shows the grade for each of the four criteria, as well as the final grade. A space for comments enables the Director of Forensics to summarize the responses from the four evaluation sheets. (See Form 5)

An aid to record keeping was developed for the system. The Tournament Credit Rating Form, see Form 6, enables the Director of Forensics to see at a glance the date the forms were distributed and if and when they were returned. Other information pertinent to grading also appears on this sheet.

STRENGTHS OF THE GRADING SYSTEM

1. The system provides the means of linking the forensic program to the intellectual and social aims of the department and ultimately of the university. As such it can help establish the cocurricular basis of forensics and diminish its unfortunate image of being merely an extracurricular club.
RATING FORM FOR FORENSIC COACH

TO: Coach
RE: Student
FROM: Dr. Carolyn Keefe

Please rate your student on the following criterion by assigning points on this scale: 8 excellent; 6 good; 4 fair; 2 poor.

_____ Interest in Personal Development: initiative in finding new material and doing research, willingness to try new events (over required number), dependability in keeping coaching appointments, preparation for coaching time, rehearsing before events.

Fully justify your rating.

RATING FORM FOR EXECUTIVE BOARD TEAM MEMBER

TO: Executive Board Team Member
FROM: Dr. Carolyn Keefe
DUE DATE: __________________________

Please rate each student below by assigning points on this scale: 8 excellent; 6 good; 4 fair; 2 poor.

Criterion: Attitude toward Forensic Participants: showing friendliness toward own and other team members, helping team members with events, attending rounds of team members.

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<th>Points</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Comments: Please justify your ratings.</th>
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RATING FORM FOR DIRECTOR OF FORENSICS

Name of Student

Semester/Year

Rate the student on the following criteria by assigning points on this scale: 8 excellent; 6 good; 4 fair; 2 poor.

Points

Support of Team Activities: serving on Executive Board, attendance at Forensic Society meetings, support of fund raising, judging or control room work for speech contest and novice tournament, community service.

Justification for rating:

Tournament Success: ranks and ratings at tournaments, improvement in competence.

Justification for rating:

TOTAL POINTS  MEAN  GRADE

FORENSIC CREDIT GRADE SUMMARY SHEET

TO: _______________________________  Student

FROM:      Dr. Carolyn Keefe

As you were notified at the beginning of the semester, your grade in SPC 399: Directed Studies in Speech Communication consists of four ratings, each carrying a 25 percent weight. Below is a summary of the ratings you received.

1. Self-Rating _______________

2. Coach(es)' Rating _______________

3. Executive Board's Rating _______________

4. Director of Forensics' Rating _______________

FINAL GRADE _______________

Comments:
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<th>Name</th>
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FORM 6
FORENSIC CREDIT RATING FORM

Fall 198  Spring

SELF-APPRaisal
COACH(ES) APPRaisal
EXEC. ED. APPRaisal

Grade
2. The system affords students with feedback on their progress. The Forensic Credit Summary Sheet given to each student serves as a summative evaluation. On it the grade abstracts the responses from all the evaluators. This feedback, along with that from tournament ballots, is an important part of the student's developmental process. C. R. Carlson also makes this claim for feedback, while deploring its infrequency:

Unfortunately, except for grades, most college teachers do not consider feedback important and rarely provide it. Yet many different forms of feedback can contribute to learning, and generally, the more feedback, the more effective the teaching. Feedback is especially effective when used to prevent errors and to provide a student with direction and a sense of achievement.8

The approach taken by the author on the summative evaluation is to emphasize the student's accomplishments and show how deficiencies in skills can be improved. This seems to build positive attitudes toward forensic participation and individual development.

3. The system utilizes evaluative input from multiple segments of the forensic program. The advantage of this approach is that observers on all fronts, so to speak, provide data on the student's response in regard to the particular criteria. This vantage point positioning, as we have seen, helps to overcome the problem of the diverse settings in forensics.

In urging college teachers to remain open to nontraditional grading, Fuhrmann and Grasha point out that sometimes students are "the best judges of how well they and other people in class are contributing to course work."9 This idea was formative to the system but operationally is not without its drawbacks. We shall now turn to that discussion.

WEAKNESSES OF THE GRADING SYSTEM

1. As a means of evaluation, the peer ratings may well be problematic. In the Kane and Lawler summarizing study of three types of peer assessment—rating, nomination, and ranking—the first emerged as the least valid, reliable, and unbiased of the group. The researchers advise that a way to mitigate against these problems is to use peer assessment as part of a multisource approach to performance assessment.10

10 Jeffrey S. Kane and Edward E. Lawler III, "Methods of Peer Assess-
Even though the system under discussion has adopted this advice, the contamination effect of peer ratings may nevertheless be operative. The data collected since the inception of the credit-granting program have not been analyzed statistically for this factor; thus a claim one way or another cannot be made with any certainty.

2. The self-assessment component carries some inherent weaknesses. Lacking the broad, comparative perspective of the teacher, the self-evaluator may only see a single dimension of accomplishment: his or hers. With such limited vision, the assessor can readily grade too high or too low. Motives may further complicate the self-assessment. Even if a person has a realistic conception of the deserved grade, pressure to achieve may result in an inflated mark.  

To some extent the ratings from the coach(es) and the Director of Forensics may counter these negative influences, but again no specific claims can be made on this score.

3. Due to the multiplicity of forms and evaluators, the system can become unwieldy. A further complication is the failure of some evaluators to observe deadlines, thus necessitating time-consuming follow-up.

If the person responsible for the system takes certain steps, however, the administrative difficulties can be minimized. First, develop throughout the team positive and serious attitudes toward the grading process. Second, give the evaluators written notice of the deadlines and expect compliance. Third, use the Forensic Credit Summary Sheet to insure accurate and efficient record keeping.

CONCLUSION

The system used at West Chester University for grading forensic participation utilizes four rating forms that collect observational data from the student, team members, the coach or coaches, and the Director of Forensics. On the positive side, the system helps wed forensics to educational goals, provides feedback to students and employs multiple observers as raters. On the negative side, the use of peer assessors may create validity and reliability problems. Furthermore, administering the system may prove unwieldy. Certainly not every forensic educator who is faced with the problem of grading students for their participation in forensics will find this system adaptable, but at West Chester University it has served important educational purposes.