Review Of Professional Resources

Jack Kay, Editor


Reviewers usually opt to critique state-of-the-art writings and theories in their field of inquiry, focusing on the latest texts and/or theoretical developments. Thus a decision to review the report of a 1984 conference initially seems a bit peculiar. However, the nature of this publication suggests that a review well after the fact is probably the best approach to take. American Forensics in Perspective (AFP) is essentially a work in which the leaders of the field take stock of the present and offer suggestions for the future. Since the future is now, it seems particularly appropriate to consider the work of the conference participants in retrospect, especially since talk of another national conference—designed specifically for individual events—is in the air.

One of the strongest aspects of the conference proceedings is the atmosphere of cooperation and concern emanating from the writings of the participants. The chapters on "Rationale for Forensics," "Strengthening Educational Goals and Programs," and "Interorganizational Cooperation" reflect a sense of mission among members of the forensic community—that mission being the continued professionalization and inter-organizational cooperation in the field. While the establishment of an umbrella Council of Forensics Organizations (as suggested in AFP and later implemented) serves a mostly symbolic function, it is a necessary symbolic function in a field composed of so many different organizations and philosophies.

AFP contains some valuable dialogues on contemporary concerns in forensics such as the tension between winning and learning, ethics and how to police them, the wording of debate topics, and judging standards for individual events. These dialogues are most informative when the chapter authors recreate the essence of the panel discussion rather than simply abridging and highlighting the panel resolutions and position paper excerpts. Fortunately, most chapter authors avoid the tendency merely to abridge.

While much of AFP centers on discussion of issues, there are still a number of specific suggestions for improving forensics. The "Strengthening Educational Goals and Programs" chapter
provides a list of resolutions which collectively offer a blueprint for how to run effective, professional programs and tournaments. The participants on these panels* deserve thanks from the forensic community for their thorough and detailed outline of prescriptions to improve the health of forensics.

Thanks are also due to G. Thomas Goodnight for his cogent reminder of the link between scholarship and the forensic community in AFP's final chapter. In a competitive activity there is always a danger that participants may lose sight of the higher goal of the activity. Fortunately, Goodnight puts that higher goal into perspective for all to read. Forensics, he says, is the pursuit of knowledge and the shaping of the whole person. Therefore:

The task of the forensic community is nothing less than the active, rigorous, on-going discovery, creation, interchange and critique of social knowledge. Social knowledge is the product of inter-disciplinary inquiry and the prerequisite to public deliberation. . . . Unhampered by ideological commitment, methodological circumscription, or professional self-interest, forensics offers a unique laboratory in which the dialect of public discourse can be creatively pursued (97). 

Ironically, the strength of AFP—its focus on the "big picture" of forensics—weakens it for this focus creates some unpleasant side effects. First, discussion is weighted too heavily in favor of the philosophies of forensics and of directors of the activity. While these issues are certainly important, many are already generally agreed upon within the forensic community. For example, "Promotions and Tenure Standards" chapter authors Dudczak and Zarefsky note at the outset that "evidence does not support the belief that there is a crisis" (23) surrounding the issue of promotion and tenure of forensics coaches, yet the chapter spends 12 pages discussing issues related to tenure and promotion—issues that seem, for the most part, agreed upon by administrators and those in forensics.

Second, discussion of already agreed upon general philosophies tend to obscure the need for treatment of smaller, more pressing issues. Although some problem areas are discussed in AFP, they are either treated too briefly (e.g., the chapter on judging standards in individual events is only a little over six pages) or fail to move significantly beyond general philosophical grounding to specific practices (e.g., the chapter on ethics). Overall, this philosophical focus gives the reader the impression that forensics has little with which to be truly concerned. Only two of AFP's chapters convincingly articulate the belief that they
were dealing with major problems concerning forensics: debate topic wording and individual event judging standards.

Third, the feeling that forensics is in good shape philosophically dilutes the obligation members of the community feel to address specific concerns that do receive illumination, a problem not found in the text but reflected by it. That is, the forensics community is so convinced of the value of the forensics ideal (as it should be) that it often neglects to examine seriously or, after examining, act upon the real (the philosophy in practice). Thus, we see the establishment of a Council of Forensics Organizations, but the council does little outside of the symbolic. We see resolutions about debate topic wording, but not acted upon; concern about "the spread" mentioned, but not directly addressed; suggestions for improving tournaments articulated, but rarely put into practice; recognition of ambiguous individual event judging standards, but few suggestions for improvement offered and/or implemented; and the list goes on.

Perhaps one of the problems in the idealism/realism dichotomy is that forensic organizations are reluctant to legislate or encourage change. Thus, the onus falls upon individual directors to act singly and hope for others to follow the lead. Since that course of action seems doomed to mediocre success, maybe it is time forensics organizations consider sanctioning tournaments, putting their stamp of approval on tournaments demonstrating commitment to encouraging what is presently only discussed at conferences. Regardless of the steps taken, future conferences would do well to consider the weaknesses of past efforts and look for the real implementation of the forensics ideal.

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*The "Strengthening Educational Goals and Programs" chapter is actually the work of two panels: 1) Increasing the Educational Value of Forensics and 2) Strengthening and Expanding Programs.