FORENSICS RESEARCH: A CALL FOR ACTION

By Sharon Porter*

In addition to the teaching and advising responsibilities expected of all college instructors, forensic coaches assume administrative and student supervisory activities not expected of their colleagues. Yet the efforts these individuals expend are not recognized or appreciated by many in the university community. Three current practices support this position. Initially, the advertised rank of vacant forensic positions as well as the current pay scales accompanying those advertisements indicates that the Director of Forensic position on many campuses is viewed as an entry level position. Additionally, in some regions of the country there is a trend to make the Director of Forensic position a staff rather than a faculty line position. This change of status is indicative of a pre-disposition on the part of university personnel to consider forensics an extra-curricular activity rather than a viable scholarly area of study. Finally, the difficulty of many forensic directors in securing tenure is problematic.

Forensic activities should be the cornerstone of the university community. No other activity on a college campus places such time, research, and social demands on undergraduate students. Drawing on information from all disciplines, successful forensics competitors become adroit at time management and proficient in articulating their views under stressful circumstances. These and numerous other advantages of the forensic experience have been or could be advanced and are known by forensic personnel.

The problem, then, is not that forensic educators are working in an unimportant area. It is the contention of this paper that the most significant problem facing the forensic community today is that we have neither documented nor articulated the importance of our area of expertise to the university community at large. We will continue to be overlooked as a viable area of study until we recognize and begin conducting scholarly research in our discipline. This statement is not meant to suggest that no research exists in forensics but it does demand that we conduct an examination of that research and evaluate its value. Much of the work conducted in the forensic area is either of a pedagogi-

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cal nature\textsuperscript{1} or consists of 'thought' pieces.\textsuperscript{2} While not minimizing the importance of these works, they do not technically fulfill the research expectations of many universities. The remainder of this work will delineate why forensic research is important, examine the types of research projects available to forensic educators, and will offer three suggestions on how forensic personnel might become more successful researchers.

**Forensic Research Is Important**

Although all forensic coaches can offer justifications for why they do not engage in research, attempts to second guess and refute those are beyond the scope of this work. Rather, this section will posit four reasons why it is imperative that we conduct forensic research.

1. **Scholarly research in forensics would enhance the probability of the forensic coach securing tenure.**

The college or university which grants a Director of Forensics tenure without publications is becoming extinct. Whether we personally agree with the publication expectations imposed, those expectations do exist. Porter reports that 73\% of Directors of Forensics are employed in tenure track positions, with 86\% stating that they are evaluated by the same criteria as other faculty members.\textsuperscript{3} 52\% of those surveyed indicated that publication was required for promotion/tenure with 71\% of the sample who were at institutions requiring research indicating that they were expected to publish as much as their colleagues.\textsuperscript{4} Many institutions indicate not only the type of research acceptable but specify a weighing system for evaluating publications. In these schematics the administrative tasks and the weekend responsibilities of the forensic director carry little weight.


\textsuperscript{3}Sharon Porter, "Evaluating the Forensic Director: Is There a Problem?" \textit{The Forensics} 72 (1986): 10.

\textsuperscript{4}Porter, 11-12.
2. Scholarly research in forensics would elevate the discipline in the eyes of our colleagues.

Speech Communication, generally, and forensics, specifically, has an image problem. Departments of Speech Communication are frequently called upon to justify their existence as an academic entity. This problem is exacerbated when our research fails to pass the scrutiny of our peers. The number of publications and grants secured signals to others in the academic community the importance of an area as an academic discipline. A recognition and appreciation of this fact is an important prerequisite for enhancing the credibility of forensic education. As Harris, Kropp and Rosenthal indicate, "Scholarship enhances the image of forensics both within the field of Speech Communication and the larger academic context."\(^5\)

3. Scholarly research in forensics would add to the knowledge of the discipline.

According to Auer, in general, "research is a means of improving our understanding and way of doing things, through addition to, or adaptations of, present knowledge."\(^6\) As with all other aspects of Speech Communication, the roots to the study of forensics as an area of research can be traced back to Aristotle. The naming of forensic and ceremonial as types of rhetoric and the divisions of logos, pathos, and ethos are relative to our discipline. Research from that time, however, has been sporadic with little or no integration resulting in useful theories. Some of the most profound works of the field (e.g. Toulmin and Perelman) were borrowed from scholars in other disciplines. Members of the Sedalia conference commented, "Because research and scholarship are the foundations from which all specific areas within a field evolve, and because they establish the basics for interrelationships among the areas, a field of study is both as strong and weak as its research and scholarship."\(^7\) Harris and his colleagues urge, "To be viewed as academically legitimate, forensics should claim theoretical grounding. Ultimately the activity is judged by scholars, and the only

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way to shed its sophistic image is through the establishment of theoretical underpinnings.  

4. Scholarly research in forensics would enhance the practical application of our discipline.

"Project Delphia Statements" warns, "Forensics needs hard evidence regarding the transfer value of forensic participation to the world outside academia." Yet, to the detriment of the discipline, this avenue of research is rarely pursued. Consequently, our conclusions and our practices are not grounded in documented fact.

Forensic educators are in an unique and enviable position. Few other areas of study have laboratory experiences as readily available to them as forensics. Regardless of whether we focus on on-campus, community, festival, or tournament competition, whether we participate solely in debate, individual events, or both, numerous opportunities exist to test the theories and practices of our discipline. According to Forensic as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective, the link between communication/rhetorical theory and practice is obvious, since they "are best served when progress in one informs the development of the other." This area, probably more than any other, demands we become more involved in scholarly research. How can we claim to be educators until we know what objectives, if any, we are meeting as we currently practice our discipline?

**Forensic Research Opportunities Are Available**

The 1959 edition of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines research as "critical and exhaustive investigation or experimentation having for its aim the revision of accepted conclusions in the light of newly discovered facts." In An Introduction to Research in Speech, J. Jeffrey Auer, indicates three types of research.

Historical studies are "the study of a period, person or phenomena in human development, in order to record discovered facts in an accurate, coherent and critical narrative that posits causations and probabilities." Although the forensic community conducts few historical studies, this type of research still offers many research opportunities. Work that would isolate a specific time or person in history and explore the strategies employed and/or compare and contrast those strategies

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9Harris, et. al. 16.  
10Project Delphia Statements," Forensics as Communication 75, in Harris, et al. 15.  
11Forensics as Communication 22, Harris, et al. 15.  
12Auer 26.  
13Auer 28.  
with what is being done today would be historical research. Another productive area would be a reexamination and synthesis of the work in a specific area with the articulation of the causations and probabilities that emerge. An example of historical research was conducted by Hale and Boster who looked at previous studies and compared the statistical findings in an attempt to determine the importance of speaking order in individual events competition.\textsuperscript{14}

Descriptive research offers even more research opportunities for the forensic educator.\textsuperscript{15} "Descriptive research is the study of existing conditions, situations or relations in order to discover or establish norms or standards."\textsuperscript{16} Descriptive studies answer questions like "Where are we? Where should we be? What is best? How do we advance from norm to goal?"\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps our inquiry should begin with descriptive research. The tournament events and the schedule by which we operate remain relatively unchanged. It would be an educational advantage to determine why students become involved in forensics, why they stay in the activity and the benefits they perceive they acquire by participating in forensics. What is the current status of the events we offer, what do we perceive are the educational objectives of these activities and are these being met? This type of research has implications for reviewing and restructuring events to insure they not only reflect valid educational objectives but meet the needs of our students. Another fruitful area of descriptive research might focus on analysis of judge critiques to determine the role they currently serve in the educational process. These studies can and would establish or verify the norms and standards of our activity.

The forensic community is most deficient in experimental research, which sadly is the type of research that carries the most credibility in the academic community. Experimental research should be the area where forensic personnel excel since there is a close relationship between this type of scholarly work and the activity in which we are engaged. Experimental research is "the systematic study of the operation and effect, or causal relationship, of a single variable factor (and occasionally of several


\textsuperscript{16}Auer 35.

\textsuperscript{17}Auer 35.
variable factors), controlled or manipulated in a situation where all other essential factors are held constant.\footnote{Auer 41.}

Testing a suggested truth, or hypothesis, in order to confirm or disprove it,\footnote{Auer 42.} experimental research seeks the "discovery of an unknown principle or law of behavior, reaction or interaction."\footnote{Mark Hickson and Don Stacks, *Nonverbal Communication Studies and Applications* (Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown, 1989) 25ff.} When our students advance a new debate case or argument, when they experiment with a new persuasive, informative, or communication analysis approach, or when our students engage in composing their own literature, they engage in the preliminary phase of experimental research. They are, in essence, testing whether or not the strategy they employ will affect their tournament performance. On an even broader level, when the forensic community experiments with new time limits for debate or a new individual event, we are testing whether or not it would be desirable to incorporate that action or event into existing practices.

The problem is that we put our theories into practice before they have been adequately tested. Perhaps this occurs because we are unaware of the methods at our disposal to test our hypotheses. Hickson and Stack indicate that the four methods by which we can design experiments and secure data are survey questionnaires, the laboratory method, field experiments, and field studies.\footnote{Auer 27.}


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Little research is conducted in the forensic community in the area of laboratory experiments, field experiments, and field research. Harris, Kropp, and Rosenthal advance six potential areas where forensic scholars can contribute to the field through these forms of research. These include using the forensic tournament as a laboratory to study the relationship between theory and practice, studying the relationship between what we teach and the knowledge we need to succeed in the "outside world", analyzing how human beings process information, determining the effectiveness of teaching techniques, establishing a decision-making rationale, and developing a theory of forensics.

"In the laboratory experiment we attempt to control all the variables in a situation except for those being tested. Even those being tested, however, are carefully controlled in that they are carefully manipulated and their effects noted." The tournament environment appears to be an excellent place in which to engage in laboratory experiments. In fact, coaches often refer to tournaments as cocurricular activities in which the concepts learned in the classroom are tested. Additionally, many universities offer credit for forensic workshops. Either of these settings qualify as a laboratory if the researcher carefully designs the study. Michael T. Ingram's work, for example, could be tested easily in a tournament situation. Ingram indicates that current practices in drawing for extemporaneous topics in tournaments do not take into account speakers arriving late or judges writing ballots. Consequently, the later speakers in the round receive more preparation time than earlier speakers. He advocates three extra minutes between speakers to equalize for these discrepancies.

Field experiments try "to control the variables under study as much as possible by manipulating degrees or levels of variables under study. Second, the field experiment allows other variables that would normally be controlled in the laboratory to influence results. The major advantage of the field experiment, however, is that it allows the study to be carried out in a 'natural' setting." The National Debate Tournament recently adopted a 9-3-6 time format rather than the previous 10-3-5 format. An experiment might be designed contrasting the satisfaction rate of debaters and judges using each of these two formats.

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23 Harris, et al. 15-16.
24 Harris, et al. 15-16.
27 Hickson and Stacks 28.
28 In fact, tournament directors at Wake Forest University, who experimented initially with the 9-3-6 format did conduct such a study.
"Field studies have little control except for the objectivity of the researcher. In the field study, the researcher enters a natural setting in an attempt to answer general questions. The researcher must find a way to unobtrusively record the variables of interest while still acting as a participant in the interaction." Many coaches feel that the length of the day at a typical forensic tournament provides an unhealthy situation. Observing and recording the reactions of students, coaches, or both—especially at the end of the competitive day, would be an example of a field study.

**Suggestions and Conclusions**

Three items can assist forensic educators become more productive researchers. Initially, we will not know where we need to go until we know where we have been and where we are currently. The first item necessary to facilitate forensic research is the creation of an index which catalogs the work in the field. While forensic instructors might wish to conduct research in a specific area, the task of reviewing literature becomes a barrier difficult to overcome. Having an index that would assist in this process by isolating relevant research in a given area would greatly expedite the research process.

Hickson and Stack indicate that "Usually our methodology will be consistent with what we are taught; that is, our training will, to a degree, influence the methods we select later in our research." The Collegiate Forensics Directory indicates that eighty-eight colleges and universities currently offer financial assistance for forensic students desiring advanced study. However, how many of these schools actually provide graduate study in argumentation or forensic related areas is unknown. While it would be beneficial to assess the type of academic programs available at these institutions, it would be more desirable to determine the research orientations of these schools. This knowledge would provide information about the research methodologies available to future forensic educators. However, it would not assist those who have completed their formal education. Many people in this latter group have viable ideas for forensic research that fail to result in papers or publications perhaps because of a lack of knowledge in how to design a research project or the means to analyze data once that data is secured. Recently it seems that each summer the forensic community sponsors conferences, yet none have served the function of assisting the forensic educator to become the forensic researcher. The time has come to either design an independent conference or have a segment of

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29Hickson and Stacks 29.
30Hickson and Stacks 23.
an existing conference, such as Alta, conduct a training seminar in research methodologies.

Finally, Harris and his colleagues recommend that our national organizations need to "come to grips with how to foster empirical research and cope with attendant problems." Initially, each organization in the forensic community should envision ways in which they can promote research in their various constituencies. A networking between these groups, possibly through the Council of Forensic Organizations, could be beneficial in creating guidelines and the adoption of them by the forensic community at large could go a long way to prevent "...ill conceived or misguided research which might detract from a positive learning environment." Additionally, the organizations that sponsor journals should encourage submission of articles based on empirical research methodologies.

For too long the forensic community has been remiss in providing the research that the discipline needs. This harms our area academically, as well as harming us personally. We must reverse this behavior if we hope to elevate forensics and forensic education to the position they deserve in the academic community.

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32Hickson and Stacks 16.
33Harris, et al. 17.