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NO. 4

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THE FORENSIC OF PI KAPPA DELTA (ISSN: 0015-735X) is published four times yearly, Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer by Pi Kappa Delta Fraternal Society. Subscription price is part of membership dues. For alumni and non-members the rate is \$20 for one year and \$50.00 for three years. Second Class Postage paid at Fargo, N.D. Postmaster and subscribers: please send all change of address requests to Dr. Robert Little, Dept. of Communication, Box 5075, North Dakota State University, Fargo, N.D. 58105. **THE FORENSIC** of Pi Kappa Delta is also available on 16 mm microfilm, 35 mm microfilm, or 105 microfiche through University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL CLIMATE OF FORENSIC EDUCATION, PART I

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Introduction¹

Intercollegiate forensics faces many challenges in the years ahead. Among them is the important task of strengthening professional support for forensic education. At present, the activity has many strong and committed educators, as well as many hardworking teachers who are less prepared for their profession than they would like to be. Some forensic educators feel isolated on their campuses; others feel less than optimally integrated into professional forensic organizations. Some find work in forensics to be very rewarding, but are frustrated by difficulties in earning tenure and promotion as forensic educators. Some forensic teachers are leaving the activity because it is too demanding. Some are worried about where we will find the next generation of educators to replace them. Although these and other concerns about the professional life of forensic education are heard in tournament hallways, voiced in organizational meetings, and speculated about in convention papers, the profession lacks empirical data on the professional climate of forensic education.

The objective of the survey project reported here was to document the forensic community's perception of its strengths and weaknesses in order to provide a basis for systematic planning for professional development of forensic educators in the years ahead.

Method

The 160-item survey was written in June 1994, based on scholarship concerning coaching forensics (Carver, 1993; Dauber et al., 1994; Gill, 1990; Hanson, 1991; Hassencahl, 1993; Hunt, 1993; Jensen, 1993; Littlefield, 1991; McGee, 1993; Murphy, 1992; Pettus and Danielson, 1992; Richardson, 1991; Underberg, 1991). The draft survey was reviewed by colleagues on the Professional Standards Task Force of the Guild of American Forensic Educators. Following minor revisions, surveys were mailed in July 1994 and January 1995 to forensic educators on the American Forensic Association, Cross Examination Debate Association, Pi Kappa Delta, National Individual Events Tournament, Phi Rho Pi, and National Forensic Association mailing lists. Duplications among the lists were eliminated and, when more than one name per school was available, the survey was mailed to the Director of forensics. In order to try to include a broad range of potential respondents, 80 surveys were mailed. This number allowed active PKD chapters; CEDA schools; NIET, NDT, and NFA member schools not yet included; and sixty-four additional Phi Rho Pi colleges to be surveyed.

Completed surveys were received from 193 respondents, which constitutes a return rate of 39%. That this percentage is relatively low may be explained in part by the fact that the survey was very lengthy (23 pages). The number of

respondents, however, is a substantial segment of the forensic community. The sample from which data is reported, then, is forensic educators from 23 major research universities (12%), 72 public four-year colleges (37%), 29 private four-year colleges (30%), 34 two-year colleges (18%), and 5 unspecified institutions (3%). Other demographic descriptions of the sample are contained in Table 1. It can be argued that the sample over-represents professional educators as opposed to temporary, or graduate assistant coaches. Given that the purpose of the survey was to provide data to guide professional development of forensic educators, it seemed important to seek responses from those professionals.

TABLE 1

Demographic Profile of the Survey Sample

Sex			Age	20-29	23	12%	Tenured Prof		80	41%
Male	126	65%		30-39	83	43%	Untenured Prof		49	25%
Female	63	33%		40-49	56	29%	Instructor		51	26%
				50+	30	16%	Adjunct		7	4%
Years of coaching			Education			Regions Identified				
1-5	39	20%	PhD Comm	76	39%	NEast	15%	NWest	17%	
6-10	57	30%	MA Comm	86	45%	SEast	8%	SCent	0%	
11-15	34	18%	Law Degree	4	2%	ECent	18%	NCent	6%	
16+	62	32%	Other	25	13%	RMtn	13%	SWest	8%	

Most survey items asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with an assertion (e.g., "Being a forensic educator is a highly rewarding career") or to complete an assertion (e.g., "The quantity of work expected from forensic students is too high...about right...too low") using a seven-point scale. Quantitative responses from returned surveys were analyzed using SPSS-X. No cross tabulations or other analyses have been completed.² Each section of the survey also included a prompt for written comments. These comments were typed into a master file, with minor editing as needed to preserve anonymity.

Overview of Survey Results

This article reports the survey results most directly related to professional development of forensic educators. Sections of the survey included here are goals and objectives of educators, professional preparation, job description and expectations, campus support, and program and position status. A subsequent article will report broader climate issues. Segments of the survey to be included there are goals and objectives for student performance, field support, lifestyle issues, diversity issues, political issues and morale. In this report, the survey questions and quantitative responses will follow the summary narrative.

Goals and Objectives

The first section of the survey sought to assess reasons why forensic educators are involved in the activity. Among the responses concerning motivations for being a forensic educator, commitment to developing students' communication and critical thinking skills showed the strongest affirmations of agreement (85% each). Three of four respondents rejected economic reasons as a motivation for coaching, while those motivated to "give back" to the activity they enjoyed as a competitor outnumbered those not so motivated by two to one. Four in five forensic educators reported a somewhat to very strong emotional commitment to coaching and perceived forensic education as a rewarding career. Two typical comments which affirm the value of forensic work are: "I coach because the profession offers a unique opportunity to offer holistic education that prepares students for life" and "Coaching debate is an extraordinarily rewarding profession in terms of the very real difference you can make to your students."

11. I am a forensic educator because my experience as a competitor motivates me to "give back" to the activity.

strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	strongly disagree
	32	51	35	17	16	8	31	NR=3
	17%	27%	18%	9%	8%	4%	16%	Mean 3.4

12. I am a forensic educator because of economic reasons.

strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	strongly disagree
	6	11	11	19	21	34	90	NR=1
	3%	6%	6%	10%	11%	18%	47%	Mean 5.6

13. I am a forensic educator because of a strong commitment to developing students' critical thinking skills.

strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	strongly disagree
	74	63	24	15	8	3	4	NR=1
	39%	33%	13%	8%	4%	2%	2%	Mean 2.2

14. I am a forensic educator because of a strong commitment to developing students' communication skills.

strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	strongly disagree
	80	54	28	10	9	5	5	NR=1
	42%	28%	15%	5%	5%	3%	3%	Mean 2.2

15. My emotional commitment to coaching is:

strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	strongly disagree
	57	68	29	23	6	7	3	NR=0
	30%	35%	15%	12%	3%	4%	2%	Mean 2.4

16. Being a forensic educator is a highly rewarding career.

strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	strongly disagree
	37	69	43	3	8	8	4	NR=1
	19%	40%	22%	12%	4%	4%	2%	Mean 2.7

Professional Preparation

Questions in this section of the survey were especially motivated by concerns raised by Gill (1990), Hassenchal (1993), and Jensen (1993), all of whom have written about the professional preparation of forensic educators. In this survey, respondents were asked to indicate the nature of their forensic training and competitive experience. While the demographic profile of respondents showed that 85% had completed graduate degrees in speech communication (76 Ph.D., 86 M.A.), questions about specific preparation for coaching revealed graduate training related to forensics to be varied. Seventy-four percent reported having graduate coursework in argumentation and 84% reported having graduate coursework in rhetoric and persuasion, but only 30% had completed graduate coursework in oral interpretation. While 62% of respondents had worked as supervised graduate coaches, only 45% had the advantage of graduate coursework in the philosophy and methods of directing forensic programs. The "have not" percentages are telling here: 10% of respondents had never taken an argumentation course, 34% had never taken an oral interpretation course, 46% had never taken a course in directing forensics, and 31% had not had a supervised coaching experience in preparation for their work as a forensic educator.

Several comments note the importance of "on the job training" and "learning on one's own" in the forensic activity. Some suggest that formal training is not needed for forensic success. One narrative points to variation in preparation as a source of division in the profession: "Lacking a formal forensics education, I would term myself more a 'forensic practitioner' than an educator. I see much of the tension in the activity now as a result of differing views between 'practitioners' and 'educators' . . . These groups have different interests and goals stemming from various experiences within the activity. Neither group is very good at understanding the admirable goals and interests of the other, perhaps as a direct result of different preparations and expectations in education." Another writer argues: "Forensics is a child of the rhetorical tradition. That many in the activity do not know or appreciate this reflects how poorly we are educating forensics teachers. Forensics is treated as the backwaters of the speech field—often for good reasons—because we do not teach students the art and science of rhetorical scholarship."

Importance of Mentors. Whatever the level of formal coursework identified by forensic educators, many cited mentoring as a common contributor to professional development. Eighty-nine percent of respondents affirmed that they could name at least one individual who had served as a significant mentor to them. While the survey did not ask respondents to name mentors, the following individuals received "write-in" designations: Robert Anderson, Dennis Beagon, Vicki Bradford, Tim Browning, Bob Derryberry, William English, Jon Fitzgerald, Brady Lee Garrison, Steve Hunt, Al Johnson, Jack Lynch, Ron Matlon, Dean McSloy, Clark Olson, Donn Parson, Larry Richardson, and Roy Wood. Carver (1993) highlights the importance of mentoring within the forensic community, noting that both the 1990 National Developmental Conference on Individual Events and the Council of Forensics Organizations have recommended efforts to increase mentoring opportunities. Carver suggests that ex-forensics directors may have an especially important role to play in this effort.

Training opportunities. In addition to being good mentors, members of the forensic community might sponsor specific training sessions for coaches in areas of perceived need. Some direction about the focus of training is provided by survey responses. Overall, most survey respondents felt reasonably well-prepared to perform their job responsibilities, with 61% perceiving themselves as better prepared than peers and 18% perceiving themselves as less well prepared than other forensic educators. Not surprisingly, large numbers of forensic educators perceived themselves as well prepared to coach and judge debate and speech events, to handle travel arrangements, to supervise assistants, to counsel and advise students, and to manage budgets. It is also heartening to note that 75% felt strongly prepared to defend their forensic program in the face of challenges or budget cuts. Respondents were more apt to identify themselves (using ratings of 5, 6, or 7 on the scale) as less prepared to coach than to judge various events, with the greatest difference reported in perceived ability to judge but not to coach debate, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Perceptions of Weakness in Preparation

(Percentage of respondents rating their preparation as less than adequate)

	<u>For Coaching</u>	<u>For Judging</u>
Debate	21%	12%
Speech Events	11%	10%
Interp Events	35%	29%

The top five areas of self-perceived weakness to which the forensic community might address educational efforts are: fundraising (48% reported less than adequate preparation), coaching and judging oral interpretation, alumni relations (32% reported less than adequate preparation), recruitment (26% reported less than adequate preparation), and tournament administration (23% reported less than adequate preparation).

31. Have you completed formal coursework in argumentation?

Yes, Ph.D. level	Yes, MA level	Yes, undergraduate level	No formal coursework
81	62	30	20
42%	32%	16%	10%

Have you completed formal coursework in rhetoric/persuasion?

Yes, Ph.D. level	Yes, MA level	Yes, undergraduate level	No formal coursework
101	62	20	10
52%	32%	10%	5%

B3. Have you completed formal coursework in oral interpretation?

Yes, Ph.D. level	Yes, MA level	Yes, undergraduate level	No formal coursework
11	47	69	66
6%	24%	36%	34%

B4. Have you completed formal coursework in the philosophy and methods of directing forensics programs?

Yes, Ph.D. level	Yes, MA level	Yes, undergraduate level	No formal coursework
30	55	19	89
16%	29%	10%	45%

B5. Have you completed a period of supervised involvement in directing/coaching a forensic program?

Yes, Ph.D. level	Yes, MA level	Yes, undergraduate level	No formal supervision
47	69	15	58
25%	37%	8%	31%

B6. Have you participated in individual events competition?

Yes, as an undergraduate	Yes, in high school	No
114	40	20
59%	21%	10%

B7. Have you participated in debate competition?

Yes, as an undergraduate	Yes, in high school	No
112	23	33
58%	12%	17%

B8. Can you identify at least one individual who has served as a significant mentor to you in your development as a forensic educator?

Yes	No
170	22
89%	12%

B9. In general, my professional preparation as a forensic educator compares to most of my peers as:

I am much better prepared	1	2	3	about the same	4	5	6	7	I am much less well prepared
	31	45	40		39	15	13	6	NR=4
	16%	24%	21%		21%	8%	7%	3%	Mean 3.1

B10. My preparation to handle the budgetary responsibilities of administering a forensics program is

very strong	1	2	3	adequate	4	5	6	7	very weak
	52	52	26		33	11	11	7	NR=1
	27%	27%	14%		17%	6%	6%	4%	Mean 2.8