

# The Forensic

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## Research Essays

Billings, A. C. Increasing diversity in the 21st Century:  
Minority Participation in Competitive Individual Events

## Editor's Notes



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# The Forensic

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## Research Essays:

- 1 Increasing diversity in the 21st Century: Minority Participation in Competitive Individual Events  
ANDREW BILLINGS

## Editor's Notes

The *Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta* invites authors to submit manuscripts related to scholarship, pedagogy, research, and administration in competitive and non-competitive speech and debate. The Editorial Board will consider manuscripts employing any appropriate methodology and is particularly interested in historical-critical studies in forensics and forensics education. Manuscripts submitted by undergraduate students and previously unpublished scholars will also receive serious consideration.

The journal reflects the values of its supporting organization. *Pi Kappa Delta* is committed to promoting "*the art of persuasion, beautiful and just.*" The journal seeks to promote serious scholarly discussion of issues connected to making competitive and non-competitive debate and individual events a powerful tool for teaching students the skills necessary for becoming articulate citizens. The journal seeks essays reflecting perspectives from all current debate and individual events forms, including, but not limited to: NDT, CEDA, NEDA, Parliamentary, Lincoln-Douglas debate; and NIET, NFA and non-traditional individual events.

Reviews of books and other educational materials will be published periodically. Potential reviewers are invited to contact the editor regarding the choice of materials for review.

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All works must be original and not under review by other publishers. Authors should submit three print copies conforming to APA (4th ed.) guidelines plus a PC-compatible disk version. Manuscripts should not exceed 25 double-spaced typed pages, exclusive of tables and references; book and educational material reviews should be between 4-5 double-spaced pages. Submitted manuscripts will not be returned. The title page should include the title, author(s), corresponding address and telephone number. The second page should include an abstract of 75-100 words. The text of the manuscript (including its title) should begin on the next page, with the remaining pages numbered consecutively. Avoid self-identification in the text of the manuscript. Notes and references should be typed double-spaced on pages following the text of the manuscript. Tables should be clearly marked regarding their placement in the manuscript.

Manuscripts should be submitted to the editor: Michael Bartanen, Department of Communication and Theatre, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, WA 98447. 253-535-7764. BARTANMD@PLU.EDU. Authors will have an editorial decision within three months.

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# Increasing Diversity in the 21st Century: Minority Participation in Competitive Individual Events

ANDREW BILLINGS

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*Despite the community atmosphere that collegiate individual events exudes, Non-Hispanic Caucasians still largely dominate participation in the activity. This study reports the findings of a survey administered to coaches, judges, and competitors which asks questions pertaining to why racial diversity is not as prevalent as it could be within the activity. Responses indicated lack of recruiting and lack of interest as primary reasons why minority students do not participate. Sixty-one percent of all respondents also argued that minorities are negatively stigmatized in forensics competitions. Six general findings are reported; ways to increase minority participation are also argued.*

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Most in the activity would argue that the forensics community is among the most accepting, open-minded segments of the American population. Within individual events, tolerance of opposing views and even close friendships among competitors from rival schools are commonplace. In fact, one could argue that the forensic community could be characterized as progressive in both its views and actions. Such a depiction leaves one perplexed when addressing issues of diversity. For an activity whose members seem to be so open-minded, one would expect individual event competitors to represent a virtual melting pot of the American demographic. Yet, while forensics is not aptly described as singly Caucasian, the presence of African-Americans is meager, with the presence of Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnicities being virtually non-existent in many regions of the country. Individual events competitions are still largely dominated by the White, upper-middle class. The question pertaining to why this trend persists is still undetermined. This article represents an initial look at the diversity variable within individual event competitions. Through the implementation of survey-based research, initial arguments are postulated in regard to first, reasons why minorities less frequently participate in forensics and second, ways to increase diversity within individual events.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While little research regarding diversity in individual events has been conducted, many scholars have addressed issues which relate to



the discussion of diversity in college forensics. Predominantly, these studies have focused upon the perceptions of African-Americans. Bowers (1996) looked specifically at the effects of in-groups and out-groups in speaking, finding that the presence of such out-groups caused defensiveness. Findings from scholars such as Bowers correlate closely with forensics applications, as minorities have traditionally been viewed as an out-group within the activity. No matter how accepting individual events may be, the overwhelming dominance of a general cultural identity group forces minorities into out-group status.

Many studies have addressed differences in dialect that many minorities implement. The wide use of Black English has been well-noted for years. In a three-year National Science Foundation study, William Labov (1985) stated that Black English vernacular "is a healthy living form of language that shows signs of people developing their own grammar" (p.1). Smitherman (1977) asserted that "80 to 90 percent of American Blacks" at least partially speak Black English. Smitherman (1992) also wrote of the functions and effects of Black English, while Doss & Gross (1992) studied how Black English causes interracial stereotyping, and Williams (1997) was among many scholars analyzing the effects of the Ebonics debate. All indicated that Black English was a valid form of communication, yet also identified dialect as problematic for African-Americans wanting to be viewed favorably within the Caucasian community. Billings (1999) studied the effects of Ebonics on perceptions of credibility. Results indicated that African-Americans who spoke Ebonics were perceived to be less intelligent, less analytical, and of lower expertise than speakers of Standard American English. However, results also indicated that the presence of Ebonics did not lower credibility ratings for perceived honesty, likeability, and attractiveness. The study also showed that when African-Americans spoke Standard American English, they were judged to be even more credible than Caucasians speaking Standard American English. Clearly, dialect plays a key role in what potential evaluators expect to hear as well as influencing credibility ratings based on what they do hear.

Institutional problems with achieving diversity have also been the focus of researchers. Hendrix (1999), Cowperthwaite (1977), and Brown (1975) all have studied issues relating to African-American faculty at the college level. Specifically, Harris (1997) argued for the need to recruit and retain more African-American faculty. Unfortunately, many colleges and universities have appeared to reach a plateau in the area of minority involvement in academia. Lack of minority participation in forensics may be derived from the lack of minority representation at the more over-arching institutional level.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Considering the dearth of research regarding differential perceptions of minorities within academia, two research questions were formulated which were specifically focused on minority participation in



individual events programs:

RQ1: Are minorities underrepresented in individual event programs?

RQ2: What biases exist within individual event competitions that may alter the level of minority participation?

## METHOD

This study utilized an eleven-question survey aimed at illuminating issues of diversity in individual events. The questions asked subjects to rate items on a fixed continuum (EX: Would you say lack of minority (non-White) participation in individual events is a: major problem, somewhat major problem, minor problem, or non-existent problem?) and also implemented items designed to yield broad, open-ended responses (EX: What suggestions can you provide that could possibly help increase minority participation in individual events?) The complete survey can be found in the appendix. In all, items were designed to address two main issues in relationship to lack of minority participation in forensics: defining the extent of the problem and offering potential solutions to the problem.

Results for fixed-continuum questions were determined quantitatively using SPSS for Windows 9.0 (1999) and open-ended questions were coded by a single researcher using content analysis. A portion of the open-ended items were also coded independently by a second researcher for the purpose of intercoder analysis. Using Holsti's (1969) formula, intercoder reliability exceeded 99 percent.

## RESULTS

In all, 155 surveys were completed by coaches, judges, and competitors at tournaments in three distinct regions of the country (Midwest, East, and Southeast). Within this sample, 68 responses were from females and 87 responses were from males. In reference to research question #1, a total of 114 (73%) respondents indicated they were Caucasian; 35 (23%) indicated African-American descent; 4 (3%) were Asian, and 2 (1%) were Latino/Hispanic. Unfortunately, 41% of all respondents did not complete the section of the survey that asked for the overall ethnic make-up of the institution they represent. Because of this lack of information, research question #1 must remain unanswered. One can argue that if this survey is representative of the activity as a whole, Caucasians make up 73% of all individual events participants, yet one cannot make comparisons to the overall institutional demographics for each of the respondents. Thus, determining if Caucasians are an even larger majority in individual events can not be determined. Still, when asked if a lack of minority participants in individual events was a significant problem, 38 (25%) indicated it was a major problem, 50 (32%) claimed it was somewhat major, 29 (18%) deemed it to be a minor problem, and the remaining 38 (25%) claimed it was a non-existent problem. However, among minorities, an overwhelming 73% of all respondents indicated it was a major or



somewhat major problem.

Research question #2 asked if a bias (for or against) minority speakers existed in individual event competitions. Fifty-three (34%) indicated there was no bias in regard to non-Caucasian speakers. Only 8 (5%) indicated a bias in favor of minorities (major or minor); the remaining 94 (61%) argued that there was a bias against minority speakers. A total of 72 (77%) respondents indicated this bias was minor, whereas 22 (23%) felt it was major. These results overwhelmingly supported research question #2, as perceived bias was indicated by the majority of respondents.

Beyond these two research questions, respondents were also asked to indicate reasons such biases exist, as well as ways to increase minority participation. Six key findings were pinpointed in the data. First, there was a distinct difference in what respondents deemed "diversity". Beyond the disturbing tendency for respondents to refer to minorities only in terms of African-Americans with no other reference to other minority groups was the fact that almost half of all respondents indicated that racially diverse participation was not a problem in individual events because there were many all-Black teams. Yet, others noted the difference between forensics as a diverse activity and forensic teams as models of diversity. While minorities represent a fair share of all forensic participants, almost all respondents to the survey indicated they were either from a team that is over 90 percent Caucasian or from a team that is over 90 percent African-American. In fact, no single team makeup was constituted of remotely equal numbers of Caucasians and minorities. Thus, minorities are present at most individual event tournaments, yet they participate largely in the form of historically Black schools. The overall activity of forensics is diverse; the individual teams are not. Rarely does a school blend Caucasians with other minority groups.

A second trend worthy of analysis was that interpretation events were regarded as a source of controversy when dealing with African-American competitors. More succinctly, Caucasians indicated that it was unfair that African-Americans had pieces that only they could perform because of racial themes. Several indicated that African-Americans are more successful in these events because African-American history involves issues such as slavery, racism, and poverty-all of which lend well to dramatic effects. Still, African-Americans indicated that interpretation events are problematic because everyone expects a racially-themed selection. "We don't get pieces on anything except racist issues," indicated one respondent. Another wrote: "If a story doesn't deal with being Black, then it's a White story and we aren't supposed to use it." Clearly, both sides of this debate argue that racially-based pieces create problems for competitive equity.

Third, several respondents argued that minorities are not participating in forensics as much as they could because of lack of interest. "It's not pushed in minority communities," wrote one judge. Another



coach stated: "It's like golf and tennis. These are White sports because Black communities show little interest." One coach wrote that the lack of minority participation stems from lack of academic focus in general. He writes: "I don't see a desire to compete in this way. There is a big push for minorities in sports, but not in academics (in general)." Some argued that increased recruiting in minority areas could increase minority involvement.

A fourth finding pertained to another reason why minorities fail to participate: lack of minority coaches and judges. This "begin at the top" approach appeared to have some merit with many respondents. "You want to find out where all the good Black speakers are? Go ask a Black head coach. Wait-there aren't any." Such sarcasm seems to tap into the frustration with minority forensic hires in general. One student wrote: "I go to a school that is over a third Black but there are no Black speech teachers in our whole department." Beyond the lack of minority coaches was the argument that there are very few minority judges as well. "I'm performing a Langston Hughes prose this year," writes one African-American student, "and I'm waiting for a Black judge so I can see what they think. I haven't had one yet." Once again, the judging issues appear to stem from problems with interpretation events more than other events, seemingly because judges will be more likely to rank a performer favorably if they are performing themes to which the judge relates. Yet, even more over-arching is the notion that before minority participation is integrated into most forensic programs, the number of minority coaches, directors, and judges must be increased.

Fifth, respondents indicated regional differences in minority participation. Respondents from Southern programs universally reported that more minorities participated and agreed that minority participation is not a significant problem. Still, respondents from the Midwest indicated much larger problems. One judge wrote: "Every year, usually eight of the top ten teams at N.F.A. are from the Midwest. These teams have very few minorities. That is where you get your problem with participation." Evidently, minority participation varies greatly from region to region, warranting geographical deconstruction of minority participation in the future.

Finally, several respondents noted that the lack of minority participation in forensics relates to the lack of minority enrollment in colleges and universities. Noting institutional racism, one coach wrote: "It's hard to make a diverse team when the college you represent is over 95 percent White." Another argued "The bias does not lie in college forensics. Forensics is a very open-minded organization. The problem lies in admissions boards that refuse to accept Black students." Such institutional racism would be the largest problem for individual events programs to overcome, as changing overarching problems with admissions departments would be a staggering task.

As a whole, while nearly half of the respondents indicated there was little problem with minority participation, the other half felt



strongly on a myriad of important issues. Some of the surveys in which the lack of minorities was not deemed a problem, still yielded responses on the open-ended questions that indicate otherwise. Without question, a significant portion of respondents felt that minority issues needed to be addressed, with one student writing that "forensics claims to be colorblind when it shouldn't be proud of that. People of color do have different needs and ignoring them is not the answer."

## DISCUSSION

A myriad of important areas regarding the diversity of individual events participation are worthy of discussion, yet no issue seems as important as the question pertaining to whether this diversity is a problem at all. Forty-three percent of all respondents indicated minority participation was a minor or non-existent problem, yet 61 percent felt there was a major or minor bias against minorities in the activity. This contradictory divide can be explained by subjugating thoughts into two distinct categories: problems with lack of participation and problems that occur once minorities are competing.

First, concerning participation, almost half the respondents felt the issue was not of major concern, yet many used the faulty rationale when arriving at this decision. One respondent indicated diversity was not a problem because "there are several all-Black teams." Yet, this argument is built on the premise that the presence of all-White and all-Black teams at the same tournament indicates forensics is diverse. This prospect fails to recognize that diversity should be within teams as well. For instance, if an all-White basketball team competed against an all-Black basketball team, one would hardly call the activity diverse; they would instead term it overt segregation. The same holds true for forensics. The presence of all-Black forensics teams is good, but the presence of a racially diverse team would be progressive. Future research needs to focus on differences between *perceived* diversity and *actual* diversity in individual event competitions.

Second, several findings regarding biases surrounding minorities were illuminated. The notion that African-Americans overwhelmingly perform racially-themed selections for interpretation was duly noted by all ethnicities. However, Caucasians often felt this was to the advantage of the African-American speaker while African-Americans often found this practice to be limiting. Future research needs to pinpoint judging preferences to determine if judges really do expect racially-themed selections from minority speakers. If this is deemed not to be the case, the notion that African-Americans are expected to perform from this limited list of pieces should be deemed a misnomer. However, if, in fact, judges do expect minorities to perform selections exclusively from their own racial backgrounds, scholars must attempt to identify why such an expectation exists.

An additional finding worthy of note is that much of the discussion of minorities within the data was relegated to African-Americans



only. Little, if any, attention was directed toward possible biases for other ethnic groups. Considering the boom in Hispanic-American citizenship in particular, this lack of discussion is disturbing. Dialogue must take place that includes additional ethnic groups beyond African-Americans and Caucasians. Only then can true change take place.

Finally, ways to increase participation were offered by many respondents. The need to recruit minority speakers is perhaps the best and most practical way to increase diversity in future years. The need for minority groups to increase the emphasis on academic competitions such as forensics is equally important, if not more important than recruiting. Clearly, the avenues for future career success that forensics provides should not be limited to certain social and cultural groups. Forensics offers countless opportunities that should be offered to all.

As previously stated, individual events teams often see the activity as progressive, open-minded, and thought-provoking. Diversity in forensics is another way that the activity can be viewed as an exemplar for other groups to follow. Forensics provides a unique possibility for true integration of all ethnic groups. As judges, coaches, and educators, we must not squander this opportunity for cultural growth. There are many other students who could benefit from forensic activities. It is now our job to reach them.

## APPENDIX

### Minority Participation in Forensics Questionnaire

**\*\*Please have each student or coach participating in individual events complete the questionnaire. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you for participating in the study!**

1.) Are you a student or coach?

Student \_\_\_\_\_

Coach \_\_\_\_\_

2.) Identify your gender.

Male \_\_\_\_\_

Female \_\_\_\_\_

3.) Identify your race.

White/Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_

Black/African-American \_\_\_\_\_

Asian \_\_\_\_\_

Mexican/Latino \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_ please list.



- 4.) Indicate the number of people on your speech team (not including coaches) who are:
- White/Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_
- Black/African-American \_\_\_\_\_
- Asian \_\_\_\_\_
- Mexican/Latino \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_ please list.
- 5.) Estimate the percentage of students at your college/university who are:
- White/Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_
- Black/African-American \_\_\_\_\_
- Asian \_\_\_\_\_
- Mexican/Latino \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_ please list.
- 6.) Would you say lack of minority (non-White) participation in individual events is a:
- Major problem \_\_\_\_\_
- Somewhat major problem \_\_\_\_\_
- Minor problem \_\_\_\_\_
- Non-existent problem \_\_\_\_\_
- 7.) What kind of bias in the area of minority (non-White) participation exists in individual events?
- Major bias against minorities \_\_\_\_\_
- Minor bias against minorities \_\_\_\_\_
- No bias whatsoever \_\_\_\_\_
- Minor bias in favor of minorities \_\_\_\_\_
- Major bias in favor of minorities \_\_\_\_\_
- 8.) What reasons can you give for any lack of minority participation in individual events?
- 9.) What suggestions can you provide that could possibly help increase minority participation in individual events?
- 10.) If you feel a bias exists for or against minority speakers, please explain here.
- 11.) Additional comments:



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Missing



# Editor's Notes

The inventory of articles for this journal is virtually exhausted. As the scholarly outlet for Pi Kappa Delta members and other forensics scholars, it is important to have sufficient submissions for on-going review and preparation for publication. This journal welcomes research articles, opinion pieces and book reviews. It welcomes submissions using any scholarly methodology. We encourage submissions from seasoned scholars and new writers, and are particularly interested in the work of graduate and undergraduate students.

The term of the current editor and editorial board ends with the publication of the Summer 2001 edition. The choice of a new editor will be made during the 2001 PKD Convention in Boise, in March, 2001. Self-nominations and the submission of nominations for Editor are now being solicited. Nominations should be directed to the Chair of the Nominations Committee, Professor Doug Binsfeld, of Hastings College. Information about the requirements for the position can be obtained from the current editor.

## **Pi Kappa Delta Mission Statement**

Forensics, as an extension of the classroom, seeks to create articulate citizens. Forensics participants, as students, and coaches and judges as teachers, seek to encourage an environment where: there is respect for others; there are standards for achievement; there is ethically responsible communication; there is knowledge about important issues; there is intellectual stimulation; and there is nurturing of the general skills of informed advocacy and aesthetic appreciation.

To achieve that outcome, Pi Kappa Delta seeks to:

1. Lead the effort of finding ways for all forensics organizations to work together whenever possible to strengthen the activity at levels and in all forms.
2. Foster the nurturing of the personal and professional lives of forensics educators.
3. Encourage the active and meaningful participation of alumni in the forensics activity, the national association, and the local chapter.
4. Strengthen the ties between forensics and both the communication discipline and the broader community.
5. Provide an environment where learning and growth are seen as equal in value to competitive success.



6. Increase the diversity of the forensics activity and the association. Encourage respect for both the diversity of ideas and life experiences. Enhance the role of forensics as a means of promoting respect for diversity in society.
7. Make forensics relevant and significant to the lives of students.





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