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AUTHOR Littlefield, Robert S.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine (1) what active forensic coaches currently perceive to be the purpose of forensic participation courses, (2) the difficulties they have had in reaching their course goals, and (3) what they think the purpose of the courses should be. Data were collected from coaches at 130 schools with active forensic programs. Results indicated that the initial motivation for the development of a participation course was the effort of coaches to academically reward students who compete on forensic teams. The coaches defined their courses to include preparation, practice, on-campus activities, and competition, and reported experiencing a number of difficulties--generally grouped into the areas of time, content, and commitment. Suggestions for improv. the course included providing objectives, creating a syllabus, offering content that is instructional, offering practice sessions, creating both competitive and noncompetitive opportunities, and developing an appropriate method of evaluation. (FL)

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THE FORENSIC PARTICIPATION COURSE:

WHAT IS IT REALLY FOR?

by Robert S. Littlefield
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND

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THE FORENSIC PARTICIPATION COURSE:

WHAT IS IT REALLY FOR?

When a student makes the decision to participate in forensic activities, the coach is perhaps more aware of the time commitment involved than the student. Preparation, practice, performance at tournaments, and on-campus activities will require a good share of the student's free time. As a way of compensating for this time commitment from an academic viewpoint, the participation course seems to have emerged as a vehicle for providing credits to students who do the work required of a forensic competitor.

Initially, coaches may have welcomed the participation course as an incentive for students to join the speech or debate team. However, because of varying interpretations regarding what "being on the team" means, many coaches and teachers have begun to develop their own definitions of what "team participation" involves. Unfortunately, a review of forensic literature to help teachers in the establishment of their parameters of "participation" provides little direction. Consequently, this study is designed to explore three topics: (1) What do active forensic coaches currently perceive the purpose of the participation course to be? (2) What difficulties have these coaches had in reaching their intended goals with the participation course? and (3) What should the purpose of the participation course be?

To obtain the data necessary to complete this study, a questionnaire was developed and sent to 245 schools with active forensic programs selected from the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament membership list.

Table 1
Forensic Participation Course Survey

1. Please indicate the state in which your institution is located.
2. What is the student population at your institution?
3. How many full-time staff members coach forensics at your institution?
4. Do you now, or have you had a "participation course" for students competing in forensic activities?
5. How often is the course offered?
6. On an average, how many students take the course each quarter/semester?
7. If offered for credit, how many hours may be earned each time the course is offered?
8. How is the course structured? (Please indicate topics covered, types of activities, time allocated for practice, and other useful information.)
9. What difficulties do you face as an instructor with the participation course?
10. Does a syllabus accompany the course? If so, would you please enclose a copy with this survey.

One hundred thirty coaches returned the survey providing for a return rate of 52 percent representing schools from 38 states.

Table 2
Survey Respondents by State

| | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Alabama (4) | Michigan (1) | Oklahoma (6) |
| Arizona (3) | Minnesota (9) | Oregon (6) |
| California (14) | Mississippi (1) | Pennsylvania (3) |
| Colorado (2) | Missouri (5) | South Dakota (4) |
| Florida (2) | Montana (2) | Tennessee (2) |
| Georgia (1) | Nebraska (4) | Texas (5) |
| Idaho (1) | Nevada (1) | Utah (1) |
| Illinois (2) | New Jersey (2) | Virginia (4) |
| Indiana (6) | New Mexico (2) | Washington (6) |
| Iowa (7) | New York (1) | West Virginia (1) |
| Kansas (4) | North Carolina (1) | Wisconsin (7) |
| Louisiana (2) | North Dakota (2) | Wyoming (4) |
| Maryland (1) | Ohio (1) | |

In addition to the recording of demographic data, a content analysis was conducted to summarize the responses to questions regarding the nature of the participation course and difficulties faced by the instructors of the participation course.

Perceived Purposes of the
Participation Course

The initial question posed in this paper is designed to explore the operational purpose of the participation course as viewed by coaches responding to the survey. While the amount of information provided by the respondents varies, the following areas can be identified: Forensic competition; preparation; practice; and on-campus activities.

Table 3
Perceived Purposes of Participation Course

| Preparation Purpose | Number of Respondents |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| IE research and development | 30 |
| Lecturers | 28 |
| Debate research and development | 19 |
| | |
| Practice Purpose | |
| Individual events | 42 |
| Debate | 23 |
| Individual sessions scheduled | 23 |
| Review ballots/evaluation | 3 |
| Videotape | 2 |
| | |
| On-Campus Activities Purpose | |
| Host tournaments | 6 |
| Non-competitive (speaker's bureau) | 6 |
| Judging high school events | 6 |
| Pi Kappa Delta meetings | 3 |
| | |
| Competition Purpose | |
| Tournament competition | 45 |
| Team meetings and administration | 18 |

Forensic competition is the most obvious and frequently mentioned purpose of the participation course. This includes attending a specified number of tournaments during a quarter or semester and competing in one or more events. The repeatable nature of some participation courses allows for a student to be virtually receiving academic credit for participation throughout his or her college career.

The purpose of the participation course involving preparation would include

lecturers to familiarize students new to forensics with the various events included in tournament competition. Both individual events and debate may be isolated as preparation areas and would include researching topics, selecting materials, developing content, and writing cases.

Using the course for practice time is also identified as a purpose for the participation course. For some, the class focuses on individual speaking events and/or debate. Actual practice sessions are conducted with team members listening to each other as a part of the learning process. For these programs with a less-structured participation course, individual practice sessions for reviewing ballots, evaluating, or videotaping are also cited as dimensions of practice.

Finally, some schools give credit for participation in on-campus activities, such as assisting with the hosting of tournaments, non-competitive speaking, organizational meetings, and assisting high school forensic programs by serving as judges.

In short, the participation courses that are currently being offered use forensic participation at tournaments, preparation, practice, and on-campus activities as dimensions of their purposes.

Existing Difficulties with the Participation Course

The coaches responding to the survey identified a number of problems facing them as instructors of the participation course. These concerns can be grouped into three general subject areas: Time, content, and commitment.

Table 4
Existing Difficulties

| | Number of Respondents |
|---|-----------------------|
| Time Problem | |
| Need more time to coach | 29 |
| More time for recruiting | 7 |
| Scheduling difficulties | 6 |
| Meeting time conflicts | 4 |
| Content Problem | |
| How to evaluate students | 12 |
| "Team" vs. "Course" | 4 |
| Differing experience levels | 3 |
| Squad meeting subjects | 1 |
| "Win Ethic" | 1 |
| Maintenance of class rapport | 1 |
| Covering both debate and IE | 1 |
| Not enough competitive opportunities | 1 |
| Not really a course | 1 |
| Commitment Problem | |
| Motivation of students | 8 |
| Not enough support from other faculty or administrators | 6 |
| Budget | 4 |
| Too little credit | 3 |
| Limited repeatability | 2 |
| Rivalry with other campus events/activities | 2 |
| Voluntary program | 1 |
| Too much work | 1 |
| Enforcing practice | 1 |

The problem listed most frequently was time. The focus of these responses centered around the time needed to work with the students in practice situations. For the most part, one full-time coach seems to be serving a larger student population.

Table 5
Number of Full-Time Staff Coaching Forensics

| | |
|---|------|
| 0 | (10) |
| 1 | (87) |
| 2 | (19) |
| 3 | (10) |
| 4 | (3) |
| 5 | (1) |

Table 6
Average Number of Students Enrolled Each Offering

| <u>Students</u> | <u>Respondents</u> |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 0-5 | (22) |
| 6-10 | (34) |
| 11-15 | (15) |
| 16-20 | (12) |
| 21-25 | (14) |
| 26-30 | (4) |
| 31-35 | (1) |
| 36-40 | (1) |
| 46-50 | (1) |
| 71-75 | (1) |

A related topic is recruitment because of the time necessary to find new students. For groups with a larger number of student participants, finding a common meeting time is also a problem.

A second concern raised by those responding to this question is the content of the participation course. Should the course be available only for competitors or should other topics be raised, as well. Among the problems identified here was the method used for grading or evaluation. For some, the issue of grading was resolved with a contract system; for others, simply participating solved the problem. The issue of purpose perhaps become further complicated when the "team" gets in the way of the "class." Also, the differing experience levels are problematic in developing content. Addressing the issue of getting everyone together for a meeting, dealing with what one respondent labeled "the win ethic" in evaluation, covering both individual events and debate, maintaining a class rapport, and not having enough competition for students are concerns raised by the respondents when developing content in the participation course.

Commitment is a third general area including a number of responses identified by coaches. Finding ways to motivate those who take the

participation course is an area of concern for several coaches. Receiving support from other faculty and administrators is an area which some coaches view as troublesome. Budgetary problems, too little credit or the inability to repeat the course, and rivalry with other on-campus events pose problems for coaches trying to keep students involved in the participation course. The voluntary nature of the activity, along with the amount of work required of an active competitor, make it difficult for instructors to reach their intended goals.

It would appear that time, content, and commitment are three general problem areas that make it difficult for coaches who teach the participation course.

Some Thoughts on the Purpose of a Participation Course

Through a discovery of what coaches operationally perceive the purpose of their participation courses to be, and problems they face as they teach such a course, it becomes useful to generate some suggestions regarding what purposes the participation course should fulfill.

Initially, coaches must decide if they are giving "participation credit" or teaching a participation course. In other words, should the participation course be a team meeting or a class? A reasonably sound case can be made for both approaches. It may be difficult to do both simultaneously. Therefore, to be most effective, a coach should decide if the purpose is simply to get everyone together once a week or if a class on forensics is the objective. While there are advantages to using a class as a meeting time, there are those who would argue that this is not pedagogically sound. If a participation course is going to be called a class and award students academic credit, then coaches have an obligation to follow certain guidelines.

Table 7
Credits Earned Each Offering

| <u>Credits</u> | <u>Respondents</u> |
|----------------|--------------------|
| 1/6 | (1) |
| 1/4 | (4) |
| 1/3 | (1) |
| 1/2 | (1) |
| 1 | (71) |
| 2 | (39) |
| 3 | (19) |
| 4 | (3) |
| 5 | (1) |

The participation course should have objectives, use a syllabus, provide for preparation and practice sessions, encourage tournament competition, and have an appropriate format for evaluating a student's performance.

Cognitive and behavioral objectives should be prepared for any participation course. These should include an understanding of the concepts underlying good composition principles, aesthetic dimensions of interpretation, demonstrable mastery of speaking skills in events with different presentational requirements, and evaluative competency.

A syllabus would seem to be a reasonable expectation for a student entering a participation course.

Table 8
Courses Using A Syllabus

| | |
|-----|------|
| Yes | (38) |
| No | (72) |

Thirty-four percent of the responding coaches use a syllabus to identify such information as the description and format of the course, objectives, staff class hours and coaching hours, text (if any), requirements of competition and the events offered, and the evaluation or grading system to be used. Included as content should be the individual events found at most intercollegiate

forensic competitions, including the interpretive events of prose, poetry, drama, and dramatic duo. Public speaking events, both prepared (informative, persuasive, communication analysis, and after dinner speaking) and the limited preparation events (extemporaneous speaking and impromptu), should be discussed. Different debate formats could be presented to allow for increased awareness and potential involvement, even in schools traditionally labeled as "individual event" programs.

Practice times and tournament dates should be included for students desiring to compete. The coaches who prefer individual work sessions over group practice sessions may wish to schedule them in addition to the class meetings. However, as long as a class is being used to award a student academic credit, some structured sessions should be included.

An original purpose of the participation course and the one used most often by respondents to the survey reflects the desire to reward competitors academically for their involvement on the forensic team. This should continue to be an important, overriding dimension of the participation course. However, avenues should be included for the non-competitive student who seeks ways to exhibit his or her skills at public speaking or reading.

A number of respondents to the survey provided a variety of ways for evaluating their students. These ranged from giving everyone a letter grade of "A" for participation, to the establishment of a detailed point scheme for preparation, practice, competition, and winning events. Whatever system is selected, the coach should make the information available to the student at the outset of the course in order to reduce any misconceptions leading to disagreements regarding the awarding of a particular grade. The problem of students repeating the participation course may complicate the grading process. If speeches are prepared during one quarter how should that reflect upon the

grade during the following quarter?

For best results, coaches should reflect upon each of these items (objectives, a syllabus, preparation and practice sessions, competition, and evaluation) when developing the structure of the participation course.

Conclusion

The effort of coaches to academically reward students who compete on forensic teams has been an initial motivation for the development of the participation course. These coaches have operationally defined their courses to include among the following: Preparation; practice; on-campus activities; and competition. While not universal, these purposes can be found in many programs. Difficulties experienced by instructors of the participation courses include time constraints, content, and commitment. Some suggestions for improving the participation course include providing objectives, a syllabus, content that is instructional, practice sessions, competitive and non-competitive opportunities, and an appropriate method of evaluation. Whatever the purpose of the participation course, one thing is clear: For students who commit themselves to the work required of a competitor, the participation course they take should provide them with more than "team spirit." As reflected through the responses to the survey, the course should provide instruction for the student, direction, and serve a useful educational function for forensic programs at institutions offering participation credit.