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ABSTRACT

A case study focused on a trio of forensics service areas in southeastern Illinois (Carmi and Mt. Carmel), southern Indiana (Evansville), and western Kentucky (Henderson, Owensboro, and Bowling Green) to examine the relative health and level of communication present within and among each of the three districts. Since most of the forensics programs in southeastern Illinois, an extremely rural area, were no longer fully active due to budget cuts and travel restrictions when this report was prepared, the analysis focused primarily on Kentucky and Indiana. Several prominent college and high school coaches from Kentucky and Indiana were interviewed to accurately assess the state of growth and cohesion present among forensics programs in the Tristate region. Findings indicated that in western Kentucky and Evansville, Indiana there is not enough funding or personnel resources to compete effectively, and there is little interaction between the two state associations. In Henderson, several small-town forensics programs lost their programs due to a shortage of funds, poor parental support, and coach burnout. Results suggested that the state speech associations in these three states may be partly to blame for the lack of cohesion and integration within the region, but lack of funds, coach burnout, lack of parental support, lukewarm administrative support, and an overemphasis on competitive, rather than educational, success are the common problems throughout the Tristate region. Results further indicated that high school coaches felt that college forensics organizations could do significantly more to promote student knowledge concerning active college programs. (PRA)

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The Tristate Region: Revitalizing High School Forensics
Activities Through the Collective Effort of College Programs.

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The Tristate Region: Revitalizing High School Forensics Activities

The Tristate region and its' forensics programs represent a complex collection of scholastic communities traversing three states and two time zones. This case study focuses upon a trio of forensics service areas: Southeastern Illinois (Carmi and Mt. Carmel), Southern Indiana (the Greater Evansville area), and Western Kentucky (Henderson, Owensboro, and Bowling Green). This forensics region could be described, to paraphrase Dickens, as existing in an environment that encompasses "the best of relationships, and the worst of conditions." Some college and high school forensics programs work harmoniously together, while others rarely acknowledge the existence of their collegiate "neighbors." Unlike some NFL and AFA districts, the Tristate lacks a cohesive regional organization to bring together and unify the three diverse high school communities represented within the three border regions of Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky. This report will provide a description of the relative health and level of cooperation present within and between each of the three districts. In preparing this case study, several prominent college and high school coaches from Kentucky and Indiana were interviewed to accurately assess the state of growth and cohesion present among forensics programs in the Tristate region. Unfortunately, in preparing this presentation it was determined that most of the forensics programs in Southeastern Illinois, an extremely rural area, were no longer fully active due to budget cuts and travel restrictions imposed by their local school boards. Consequently, the primary focus of this

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analysis will center upon the forensics communities in Western Kentucky and Southern Indiana.

Western Kentucky

Henderson/Owensboro

Western Kentucky is known for breeding champion racehorses, distilling fine whiskey, coal mining and developing nationally prominent athletes, such as Rex Chapman--an NBA player with the Charlotte Hornets. It is not particularly well known for developing top flight forensics competitors at either the high school or collegiate level. There are several active high school forensics programs in the Owensboro/Henderson area, but most are poorly funded and lack the kind of administrative support needed to consistently travel outside of Kentucky. Henderson is a city of 25,000, located directly across the Ohio River from Evansville, Indiana. Henderson Community College is the city's only institution of higher education and it does not currently provide the personnel or budget to support a forensics program. In the late 1960's, the college did sponsor a modest debate program for its students. The program was eliminated due to the loss of its coach, Ken Gibson, who moved to work in administration at another 2-year institution in Kansas.

Henderson County High School has a fairly active speech program that competes primarily within the Southwestern region of the state, which includes secondary institutions in Murray and Paducah. The Henderson High squad traditionally hosts a tournament offering individual events during the spring semester each year. Very few

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Western Kentucky schools cross the river to compete against programs from the Evansville area. The Kentucky programs simply do not have the funding or personnel resources needed to compete effectively and there is little interaction between the two state associations. Dinetta Noffsinger, Henderson's new coach, noted that the lack of strong programs in neighboring Owensboro places a severe strain on their finances as they often travel to Bowling Green, some 95 miles away, for tournaments. Several small town forensics programs, in the area surrounding Henderson, have lost their programs due to a shortage of funds, poor parental support, and coach "burnout." Most of the individuals serving as high school speech and debate coaches in Western Kentucky receive little or no remuneration for their efforts, which tends to exacerbate the problem of coach "burnout." Henderson and the schools in Owensboro rely primarily upon the faculty and forensics programs at Western Kentucky University and, to a lesser extent, Murray State University to provide regional high school tournaments, coaching workshops, and summer debate/forensics institutes for their students.

Owensboro

This community of 55,000 is the largest in Western Kentucky and supports four high schools including: Owensboro High School (OHS), Daviess County High School (DCHS), Apollo High School, and Owensboro Catholic High School. Owensboro high schools are very supportive of competitive extracurricular activities for their students, unfortunately they rarely reinforce that moral support

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with travel funding. Consequently, both Apollo and DCMS engage in only one or two forensics tournaments each season. Their most consistent competitive involvement centers around an annual trek to WKU for a one-act play competition according to DCMS' theatre coordinator Renee Eaden. Over the last five years, the time and student resources for forensics travel have greatly diminished within her school. The limited growth of high school forensics programs within the Ohio Valley can be directly traced to a lack of committed individuals willing to coach speech and debate at the district level. Similarly, many of the private schools in the region, including Owensboro Catholic, have been forced to drastically reduce their overall support for extracurricular activities to resolve revenue shortfalls due to slackening student enrollments.

Kathy Whitmer, at OHS, uses her speech class to involve students in mock trial, academic challenge contests, theatre festivals, and five to seven high school speech tournaments a year. The administration at the high school provides the program with approximately two thousand dollars for tournament travel within Kentucky. OHS routinely travels to individual events tournaments in Bowling Green, Louisville, Bardstown, Murray, and Lexington. Whitmer encourages all of her students to participate in forensics (at least once) if their schedules will allow, but usually only a small group (5-10 speakers) travel to each tournament. She reports that her students maintain a consistent record of modest success and it tends to encourage their continued and energetic involvement

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in other competitive speech activities within the community, such as service club contests. Very few of her graduating students go on to participate directly in collegiate forensics. The benefits of forensics according to Whitmer include "an opportunity to gain positive publicity for the school and provide students with a taste of competitive speech in the process."

The consensus among secondary educators in Western Kentucky is that academic challenge teams and quick recall squads tend to receive a great deal more support than forensics programs. In the minds of administrators, those programs involve much less student travel, funding and substantially less teacher preparation than debate or forensics. Prospective high school forensics coaches must be willing to build a network of support, from the ground up, while demonstrating unconditional love for the activity. Even if a new "coach" possesses those qualities their long term prospects for developing a successful forensics program in this area are still not particularly promising.

There are three diverse institutions of higher education in Owensboro including: (1) Kentucky Wesleyan College, a small, private, Methodist school with 600 students, (2) Brescia College, a small, private Catholic school serving approximately 800 students, and (3) Owensboro Community College (OCC), a public 2 year institution within the University of Kentucky Community College System (UKCCS) with an enrollment of over 2,600 students. During the last two decades, neither Brescia or Wesleyan has supported any type of forensics activities. Occasionally, college

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faculty would judge at high school tournaments or guest lecture in middle school speech classes, but that was the extent of their involvement with forensics. In April 1991, Owensboro Community College organized a community college system speech tournament offering individual events competition. This past October, OCC provided financial support to supplement tournament travel and assist the new program's efforts to host a collegiate speech and debate tournament at Owensboro High School. The OCC program has attracted several students who are interested in debate and individual events competition. Several of the new squad members come from local high schools in the many small communities surrounding Owensboro and none has any previous forensics experience. The five county area outside of Owensboro is populated by small, rural high schools which generally have little money to support extracurricular activities that involve overnight travel, with the notable exception of athletics. A large percentage of the growing OCC student body comes from the five county region and few can spare the normal quantities of time necessary to be fully involved in intercollegiate forensics. However, some can spare a few hours or part of an evening to help judge and coordinate high school and middle school speech contests within the Owensboro community. OCC will host the UKCCS system speech tournament again in 1992 along with a regional middle/high school speech contest.

Several of the middle schools in Owensboro support highly active speech programs which often include mock trials, Lincoln-Douglas debates, and persuasive speaking activities for their students.

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The level and quality of high school and middle school speech instruction should show marked improvement in coming years as the new standards imposed by the Kentucky Education Reform Act come on line. KERA is a legally binding plan that will be in full implementation within the Kentucky educational system by the late 1990's. The program is designed, in part, to demonstrably improve the communication skills of Kentucky students, especially in the areas of reading and writing. Despite the good intentions behind KERA, however, it may place severe financial constraints upon those school districts which currently fund high school forensics programs. But, most of the "new" KERA money will provide funding for testing and monitoring programs, rather than enhanced support for extracurricular activities like forensics.

Bowling Green

The current health of high school forensics in Henderson and Owensboro depends upon extensive program outreach by the Western Kentucky University (WKU) and its' forensics program. Professor Judy Woodring wears two "hats" while serving as WKU's forensics director and President of the Kentucky State High School Speech Association. Woodring coordinates one of the most diverse and active college speech and debate programs in Kentucky. WKU travels to 16-20 tournaments each season and hosts several large high school tournaments on its' main campus in Bowling Green. The squad hosts a well attended September workshop for high school programs in Western and Central Kentucky. They also sponsor a one week high school forensics workshop during the summer each year. High

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school forensics programs in Bardstown, Henderson, and Bowling Green come together at tournaments to forge a forensics "community" that covers a highway distance, between the three cities, of over 200 miles. It is significant that every Western Kentucky coach interviewed spoke in extremely positive terms about WKU's contributions to high school forensics within the region. Dinetta Noffsinger, first year speech coach at Henderson County, observed that "WKU is a great asset for us, they offer well organized tournaments, seminars, and workshops...Western is terrific." Western is also a model college program because they are one of the few programs in Kentucky that competes successfully in both CEDA debate and individual events on a large scale. WKU is able to attract top quality high school students from programs in Bowling Green and Evansville. WKU forensics is well funded in comparison to other Kentucky college programs. They provide scholarships to some "blue chip" recruits, are provided two graduate assistants, and have an extensive regional network of prominent alumni who support the program in a variety of ways. Judy Woodring, WKU's Director, has a formula for success that blends an optimum level of student involvement, an outstanding debate and individual event program, and extensive outreach to high schools on both sides of the Ohio River.

Southern Indiana

Evansville, Indiana is an industrial city of 100,000 and boasts some of the stronger high school forensics programs in the region. The city is served by two highly respected regional universities,

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but only the University of Southern Indiana (USI) actively participates in an outreach project involving high school forensics. The University of Evansville, a private institution with an enrollment of over 4,000 students, is consistently recognized for its' fine theatre and broadcasting programs, but has no forensics program. USI is a rapidly growing state university providing good programs and inexpensive education to over 7,000 students. The University once had a very active college forensics program that travelled to several tournaments each season. But, for a variety of reasons, the program has been on semipermanent hiatus since 1981. Ultimately, the speech communication department hopes to revitalize the program once the necessary student and faculty personnel are in place. However, USI hosts an extremely well received high school individual events tournament each November on its Evansville campus. USI students also consistently serve as judges at numerous tournaments within the Evansville area. Helen Sands, along with co-director Mary Schroeder, run the tournament as a community service project on behalf of the department. Their tournament usually offers most of the traditional high school events along with Congress, Broadcasting, and Oratorical Interpretation (performing historic speeches). The tournament is well attended and benefits USI in several ways according to Sands: "high school students really enjoy the opportunity to spend time on a college campus, interact with college students, and many of them decide to reconsider their choice of college, in favor of USI, as a result of the tournament

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experience." The department offers courses in broadcasting, a variety of speaking courses, and a program geared to preparing prospective high school teachers to teach speech. The fall tournament is about the only outreach activity USI can manage in the immediate future due to a shortage of faculty and a lack of available classroom space.

The Evansville high school forensics community includes programs at Reitz, North, Harrison, Evansville Day, Castle, Bossey, Mater Dei, Tell City, and Jasper high schools respectively. Barbara Drury, a first year coach at North High School, affirms the value of the USI tournament noting that "the event is one day, provides lot of individual events, and provides students of all interest levels an opportunity to attend a large, local tournament." Her squad will also cross the river to attend WKU's regional tournament in November, one of the few Indiana teams to do so. According to Drury, Evansville forensics programs lack a direct tie-in with an active college program and, consequently, they search for various opportunities to link up, such as the Bradley University Speech Tournament in Peoria, Illinois and the Princeton High School Regional Tournament in Cincinnati, Ohio. North high school is a well respected regional program competing successfully in both debate and individual events.

Dan Durbin has coached high school forensics in the Evansville area for more than 10 years. He worked to build a successful program in debate and IEs at Tell City High School for seven years before moving on to Reitz in Evansville. Last year, according to

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Durbin, Reitz High School finished ninth in the nation, while fielding a squad ranging in size from 85-120 students. Reitz is a well funded high school forensics program. Durbin's squad attends ten to twelve tournaments each season in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio in order to seek "the highest levels of competition available." Occasionally, Reitz will attend a Kentucky tournament when some of the "better schools in the state are expected to compete, including Calloway County and Murray high schools" relates Durbin. He also supports the college tournament hosted each year at USI, describing it as a valuable and well managed event. Other schools in the area sometimes view the Reitz program in a negative light because Durbin, by his own admission, takes his squad to the most competitive tournaments available, which means local tournaments are sometimes left off their schedule.

The Reitz program has no long time link with one college forensics program, but Eastern Illinois University has made several well received visits to the area during the last two seasons. Forensics students in the Evansville area seem especially interested in college programs at Ball State, Illinois State, Bradley, Western Kentucky, Murray State and Indiana University.

Summary

Coaches on both sides of the Ohio agreed that Illinois schools rarely interact with their programs either through correspondence or tournament attendance. The state speech associations in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky may be partly to blame for the lack of cohesion and integration within the Tristate region. The other

varied causes of low cooperation levels between area high school programs include insufficient funding, coach "burnout," lukewarm administrative support, indifferent parents, and an overemphasis on competitive, rather than educational, success. High school coaches throughout the region, however, consistently observed that college programs in the area do a good job of providing outreach to their students.

They also felt that college forensics organizations, such as AFA, could do significantly more to promote student knowledge concerning active college programs, including state by state data regarding scholarships, tournament travel opportunities, program focuses (IEs or Debate), coaching biographies, prominent alumni, program histories, and coaching expectations. A national publication designed to increase student knowledge could be produced through a survey conducted through AFA and distributed at NFL regional and national tournaments or in conjunction with high school workshops and institutes for interested students. Such a publication would probably need to be updated at least once every two years, but an AFA committee or NFL counsel could effectively handle that task.

Coaches also saw value in the idea of developing a regional (Tristate) forensics organization or committee involving both college and high school directors. A regional forensics organization might encourage increased cooperation between the three states specific to such important issues as tournament scheduling, college program development, mentoring programs for new

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high school coaches, workshops for students and judges, fee waiver policies for underfunded programs, regional fall and spring competitions involving schools from all three states, and development of a means to communicate and publicize the value of forensics activities to administrators, parents, and students throughout the region. It was also felt that the development of new college programs in the area, such as OCC, was a positive step for the region as a whole.

College coaches seem unified in their perception that healthy high school programs enhance the growth of their own programs. However, some college directors feel that high school coaches could be more supportive and helpful when regional and state tournaments are hosted on college campuses. Similarly, university coaches feel that the NFL needs to become more involved in providing outreach programs for its' membership. On a national level, too much of the burden for running large scale high school tournaments, workshops, and summer institutes falls upon the shoulders of a few large college programs.

Finally, high school coaches need a greater level of training and support from local districts and administrators. Far too many prospective high school speech coaches lack the experience and knowledge to effectively manage the myriad responsibilities and personalities associated with coordinating an active forensics program. In the near future, high school coaches and college directors must abandon the notion of self preservation and adopt a more unified vision to promote collective harmony and growth.

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