

You Don't Have to Win Nationals: Cognitive, Professional and Interpersonal Benefits of Forensics to Student Participants



As anyone who participates in forensics understands, our activity generates myriad positive effects for all who participate. In fact, so abundant are the benefits of forensics that one article could not contain them all. This article is the first installment of a 3-part series which explains the benefits of forensics to students, educators/administrators, and communities.

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For every Shelley Long (1st place Oratory, 1967) or Michael Urie (1st place DI, 1998), there is a Ted Turner or a Brad Pitt.

In other words, for every NFL National Champion who goes on to achieve widespread success, there are countless more NFL competitors who don't win Nationals, and still go on to achieve widespread success using the skills they learned in forensics. Most competitors, even the really good ones, never win nationals. It's statistically impossible. Only 20 students a year, at the very most, will go home with a first place trophy. Fortunately, the winner's circle in forensics extends far beyond the National Tournament stage. Decades of research confirms what members of our community have always known – that every student who competes in forensics, wins.

Competitive forensics demands high level commitment and sacrifice from participants. Successful competitors spend hours reading, researching, and practicing – in fact, top competitors invest effort comparable to a graduate school thesis (Minch, 2006). Yet this commitment generates multiple-fold returns for those who make the investment. In 2007, the National Forensic League listed 93,000 student members in its ranks; in total, over one million members have joined

the NFL (National Forensic League, 2008). As a group, these students surpass their peers academically, professionally, socially, and personally as a result of their time in competitive speech and debate. Not surprisingly, researchers have examined the forensic population at length and overwhelmingly concluded that the activity extends unparalleled benefits to its student members. The crux of their findings appears below.

Forensics develops communication and critical thinking skills.

Research overwhelmingly indicates that forensics increases students' oral and written communication skills (Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fine, 2001; Luong, 2000; Minch, 2006). To prepare cogent speeches, forensic students must refine their written communication to a substantially higher level than the general high school population. A single debate tournament, for example, requires written work tantamount to two research papers, including revisions (Carr, 2002). Along these lines, interpretation events require well-written introductions and careful study of literature (McCrary, 2004). Not surprisingly, some argue that “the best writing course imaginable is high school debate” (Carr, 2002, p. 26).

Communication skills carefully honed in forensics extend beyond the classroom to the professional and the personal realms, where speech and debate students can proficiently conduct group discussions and interpersonal conversations in real-world settings (Colbert & Biggers, 1985). Even as communication skills decline among American students (Bellon, 2000; Snider, 1998), forensic competitors continue to develop excellence in communication. This hallmark of debate and speech participation is perhaps one of the most significant, given that “superior communication and persuasive skills are essential for success in both the college classroom and professional life” (Luong, 2000, p. 6).

Additionally, researchers consistently note that students in competitive forensics gain superior critical thinking skills (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt & Loudon, 1999; Bellon, 2000; Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fine, 2001; Luong, 2000; Minch, 2006). Rather than encumber students with another set of information to memorize, forensics actually provides participants with a tool for learning (Bellon, 2000; Snider, 1998). As Bellon explains, “When students are encouraged to think aloud – specifically, when they practice critical skills with their peers—they gain experience they may then apply to their



own internal reasoning processes” (2000, p. 163). Critical thinking contributes to an engaged, mature understanding of subjects across the curriculum. As a result, speech and debate participation typically coincides with higher grades and general intellectual curiosity (Minch, 2006, p. 7). Not surprisingly, many former forensic students vociferously affirm their decision to compete. Among them, Fulbright Scholar and a four-time NFL National Qualifier Jonathan Carr acknowledged that “joining this activity is the best educational decision I have made to date” (Carr, 2002).

Forensics prepares students for college and the job market.

Competitive speech and debate participation serves as a reliable indicator that a student will pursue higher and postgraduate education. Fine’s (2001) survey of high school debaters indicated that 99% of those surveyed planned to go to college. Colbert and Biggers reported a study which notes that “90% of debaters go on to achieve at least one graduate degree” (1985, p. 239). Fortunately for students, colleges and universities are well aware of the academic gains associated with forensics. Yale Professor Minh Luong explains that in an age of grade inflation, “The National Forensic League, with its mission of ‘Training Youth for Leadership,’ is one of a handful of national high school organizations

which leading colleges use as a barometer of success” (2000, p. 5). Luong argues that forensics demonstrates a student’s ability to dedicate him or herself to a goal and pursue it relentlessly – evidence of dedication and passion. Additionally, speech and debate students tend to score higher on standardized tests including the SAT and the ACT (Fine, 2001; McCrady, 2004). Both factors translate into higher than average acceptance rates of forensic students into top-tier colleges and universities (Luong, 2000). The benefits extend beyond admission, as well: more forensic students receive scholarships than their counterparts (Minch, 2006). For the academically precocious high school student, this combination of skills-development and vitae-building can provide a ticket to highly exclusive educational opportunities – for which they are well-prepared.

After graduation, speech and debate students discover that employers enthusiastically hire forensic alumni. As Bellon explains, a number of professional fields “are more likely to approve of students if they have debate experience” (2000, p.165). In this vein, many forensic competitors find themselves drawn to the legal or political arenas, where forensic background is virtually a must (Fine, 2001). However, speech and debate experience provides an irrefutable edge to job-seekers in all fields. As Snider pointed out, communication skills “remain the most important factor that employers

look to in hiring” (1998, p. 24). Perhaps Colbert and Biggers say it best: “In a time when many of our students ask us how educational activities will help them get a job, the answer seems to be unequivocal. Debate experience is highly valued by the business world (1985, p. 239). After procuring a job, alumni find that speech and debate experience can also encourage career success and advancement. As one prominent vice president explained, “my Ivy-League MBA got me my first job here, but my forensics experience gave me the tools to be effective which allowed me to be promoted into my current position” (Luong, 2000, p. 6).

Forensics facilitates valuable relationships and personal growth.

Even as students improve their educational foundation, they acquire an invaluable social network through forensic competition. In part, this network stems from the development of social skills, as Minch explains: “These experiences [in forensics] foster interpersonal sensitivity, improved appreciation of the needs of a group or team, and heightened awareness of the importance of audience adaptation – so critical to an effective performance and everyday communication interactions” (2006, p. 15). Social gains also spring from students’ interactions with members of the speech and debate community. Chief among these, students form a closer bond with their coaches than with other teachers. This mentoring relationship encourages them to invest fully in the activity and their education (Parcher, n.d). Additionally, many students contend that their team serves as a surrogate family, providing a critically important source of affirmation and support to high school students during their tumultuous teenage years (Fine, 2001). Best of all, students who engage in forensics often find that the relationships they form in the activity last a lifetime (Carr, 2002). Moreover, many relationships formed in forensics prove extremely helpful to college-bound competitors. Advisors frequently remind students that mentoring relationships can parlay into compelling letters of recommendation or networking opportunities (Duban, 2005). Clearly, the forensic community itself generates a host of reasons to participate in the activity.

Finally, speech and debate competitors gain critical life skills that distinguish

them from their counterparts. Focus and determination, trained in competitive rounds, enable former competitors to overcome professional and personal challenges after high school (Luong, 2000). Similarly, competence and self-confidence translate into success long after a student's competition days have ended (Fine, 2001). As Hinck explains: "A competitive season simulates life situations requiring adaptation to changing circumstances, recommitment to achieving one's goals, coming back from a disappointing experience, and hard work without guarantee of success" (2003, p. 62). These life lessons develop character in speech and debate students: to put it plainly, "debate instills in teenagers the skills necessary to be competent adults" (Carr, 2002, p. 26). Additionally, competitive forensics enables students to establish an identity as members of a team (Hinck, 2003). The community, noted for its inclusivity, tends to accept -- and often reward -- people who seldom fit into traditional stereotypes (Allen, et al., 2004). For this reason, students who don't fit into high school stereotypes often find a place to belong in the forensics community. As Crawford noted, "Competitive speech offers the benefits of competition to large numbers of students who are never going to wear the home team's uniforms on the athletic field -- but who nonetheless matter a great deal to their parents, their communities, and the future of their country" (2003, p.21).

Final Focus

Competitive forensics fundamentally alters the thought processes and perspective of every student who participates. On academic, professional, social, and personal levels, forensics affects the lives of participants to a degree that no other co-curricular activity can replicate. Not every student will win nationals...but every student will receive unparalleled benefits from his or her forensic experience, proportional to the effort he or she invests. Whether preparing for the future or pursuing intrinsic gains, every student should demand the opportunities available through forensic education. You don't have to bring home a national championship to succeed in the National Forensic League. Everyone who participates in our vibrant community, wins.

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