

## Starting a Team

Larry Schnoor, Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN

James Kozinski, Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN

### Abstract

*Starting a forensic team at a College or University can be an extensive and challenging undertaking for a student or faculty member attracted to the idea. When determining the possibility of establishing a forensic program, research on the history of the previous programs at the institution must be done. Once it is determined that a program can be established, concerns should as budget, travel, and program direction need to be addressed. Students can certainly start a program, but faculty advising opens doors students are unable to unlock. Furthermore, if one student goes alone in the program's inception, the program ceases to exist when that student stops participating. Once a program has been established, its survival is dependent upon the continuance of recruiting new students. Team building, goal setting, and establishment of traditions are ways to insure program survival and success.*

The College/University activity of forensics has numerous changes each year in its make-up of schools participating, schools no longer participating, and coaches—whether they are student or department supported programs. Our article is an attempt to provide information and suggestions to answer the question "how do I start a team?" The remarks are not meant to be prescriptive nor will they fit every situation, but rather they are to be a source of ideas, suggestions, and recommendations for individuals—be it a student or a faculty member, to check. We must all remember each school is different, each program is different, and there are numerous differences in the approach to forensic programs across the nation.

In attempting to get at the question, "How do I start a team?" it has to be recognized whether it be a student-run program or a faculty-run program supported by a department, a number of issues will be the same. Therefore we shall put forth a variety of things that need to be considered in either case, and in our remarks we will attempt to draw attention to the differences between student--faculty directed programs. Every year students arrive on a campus with an interest in forensics. Perhaps they had been on a high school team in either individual events or debate, or they have heard about forensics and have decided they want to participate. However, upon arrival, they discover that the school has no forensic program and they want to know what to do. We suggest the following:

1. First some research must and should be conducted. In this research the student should attempt to find answers to the following questions:
  - A. Was there ever a forensic program at the school?

- B. How successful was the program?
  - C. What was the scope of the program?
  - D. How was that program supported - funded?
  - E. Why was that program discontinued?
  - F. Was there a faculty member serving as the Director of Forensics?
  - G. What is the current position of the Department of Communication or the University/College in regard to a forensic program?
  - H. What are the requirements for any student organization - activity on campus?
  - I. If there was a previous forensic program, are there any alumni of that program that can be reached for help?
  - J. What were the travel patterns
2. Once the research has been completed, and material gained in answer to the above questions, the student can then begin to work on determining if it will be possible to establish a forensic program. These same questions need to be addressed by a Faculty person as well - in beginning a new program - or attempting to resurrect a program after a long absence.

It is not an easy task. It is not like the age-old idiom of "Oh lets put on a play!" and the neighborhood kids find an old barn and everyone pitches in and within a couple of weeks a play is presented to the parents or the guests at a summer camp or resort. If it were that easy, life would be wonderful. Let's say that the research indicated that no previous program has ever existed. In that case, our recommendation is that the student should first approach the Chair of the Speech or Communication Department to find out if the Department would be willing to serve as the sponsor and or support the program. If they are not interested, then the student could choose to approach some other Department to see if it would be interested in supporting the program. With the support of a Department on campus, the forensic program has a greater chance of success both in terms of being established but also of being continued in the long run. The Department may have reasons why it would or would not support the establishment of a program. The educational nature of the program is an issue that needs to be considered. The Department may not have any budget to support a faculty member to serve as the director of the program, but may be willing to have a graduate student or in some cases, even an undergraduate student, assume that responsibility.

Should it be discovered that no Department has an interest in being involved with the creation of a forensic program, the logical place to go would be the office that deals with student activities. Almost every College/University has an administrative unit that is concerned with student organizations that are extra-curricular or co-curricular in nature. The rules and regulations related to the formation of student organizations could be obtained as well as information related to the funding of such activities. Anyone interested in starting a forensic program naturally needs to be concerned with the recruitment of students to be on the

team. In some cases, there may be a single student that wants to have a forensic program. If that student is not able to find others, or not able to come up with support from a department or a student activity account, then the student, if they have enough financial means themselves, may make the decision to enter tournaments and "go it on his/her own." This is not recommended. This does not lead to the establishment of a forensic team nor a forensic program and once that student decides to stop or graduates, the school no longer has a forensic team/program. While student run programs do exist, the track record for them to exist over a long period of time is not good. However, there are some exceptions. A student run program has existed at Ohio State University for a long period of time. Anyone wishing to discover how that has been made possible, may wish to contact the Student Activities Office at Ohio State University to find out how the program has survived and to learn more about the program's administration. There are other student run programs as well but since no official record is kept of just how programs meet this description, it is difficult to determine just how many exist. A recent example of a student run program is at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. After many years of being without a forensic program, one has recently been revived as a student run program called the Collegiate Forensics League of the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

In attempting to get a team/program started, it is always helpful if a faculty member is involved as either the Director of the Program or as a faculty advisor. Having a faculty member as part of the drive to create a forensic program opens doors that may be closed to a student when attempting to gain access to files needed to recruit students for the team. Also, a faculty member may have more ability to book things on campus, such as vehicles and practice rooms etc. Admission offices on campus have the names of incoming students that may have expressed an interest in forensic activities. If this listing can be obtained, it gives the individual(s) attempting to start a team a place to begin. Once this list has been obtained, a letter could be drafted to send to the incoming students, welcoming them to the school, and inviting them to attend a meeting of the forensics team. This letter could also contain any additional materials related to the forensic program to help spike the students' interests in becoming a part of this new venture.

There are numerous methods of selecting team members. Some individuals may make the decision to develop a try-out system, others may work with anyone interested in participating on the team. This decision may be based on the rules of the college or university as well as the rules concerning the budget support for the program. Whatever system is favored by the person(s) attempting to begin a program, the final system may be determined by the Administration of the University or College, or the Department in which the activity is housed. In some cases, a student allocations committee may provide the financial support for the team, and thus may have a voice in determining the number of students as it is related to funding.

Besides the use of a letter to interested students, programs may have posters prepared and placed around campus during the first week of the school year, or

during any orientation sessions for the registering of new students. Another method of recruitment of students may be to ask your colleagues in the department to help identify students that may be interested or have the ability to do well. These students then could be approached individually or a letter could be sent to them, asking them to stop in and visit about the forensic program.

Whatever method is used to recruit students, it needs to be remembered that it will take work; it is not an easy task to just find students to begin a program. The first year may find only a small number of students willing to put in the time and effort to take part in forensic activities. However, it is a beginning. A program needs to build and develop and it may take several years until it is on a solid foundation, but it will be worth it. In the development of a program, one should be looking at the long run as well as the immediate situation of taking part in tournaments. As one approaches the establishment of a team, it needs to be recognized that it takes work. A dedicated individual is needed to spear-head the effort or it will not succeed. The following check list provides some of the things that this individual should consider:

- Starting a team is not a part-time job.
- Look for recruits,
  - Posters.
  - Recruit freshmen - Many freshmen get into patterns in which they will remain through school.
- Find free advertising.
  - School Newspapers.
  - Student Activities Handbook.
- Get meeting space.
- Recruiting.
  - Be positive.
  - Ease students into the activity.
  - Emphasize social aspects.
  - Be non-threatening.
  - Do not stop recruiting after the core has been established.
  - Consider what size team the budget can support.
  - Make sure students know you exist.

It is impossible to begin without being aware of the relationships needed to foster and develop a forensic program. This includes faculty members, administrative officers and offices, maintenance staff, business offices and others. If a program is going to be associated with an academic department such as a Department of Communication or with a Student Activities and/or Organizations office on campus, a number of areas will need to be determined.

In starting a forensics program/team, whether it is a student run program or a program supported by a department with a faculty member in charge, all of the following will need to be considered.

**Budget Concerns:** A team does not exist simply because there are students that wish to participate or there is a wish in the department to have a team. It costs money to have a program and the amount of money needed or available will determine what direction the program may take. Travel expenses will need to be determined and will include such things as transportation, lodging, meals and tournament entry fees. Equipment and reference materials for the program will need to be considered and will include supplies needed for the team. The cost of telephone, duplication, memberships and subscriptions will need to be addressed as well. The source of this money also needs to be determined. Not every department has the funding to support a program - be that for the team itself or for a faculty and/or a graduate student to direct the program. If it is a Student Activity funded program, what percentage of Student Fees may be allocated and how that allocation is determined will need to be investigated.

**Financial Responsibilities:** Whether it be a student-run program or a faculty directed program, someone must be in charge and responsible for all the financial matters related to the team. It is important to know exactly who that individual will be, what procedures must be followed, and what records must be kept. The documentation of expenses incurred, the signatures required in order to spend any money, the expense reports that need to be filed, the use of credit cards and the limitations imposed on any money and the person handling the money must be clear to everyone involved.

**Travel Concerns:** It can be assumed that the forensic program will be involved in activities off campus - i.e. attending tournaments, the issue of how one gets to the tournaments needed to be considered as well. The person in charge of the program will need to find out what the College/University policies are in regard to off-campus travel. Such things as the use of College/University vehicles, who may drive, how far may the vehicles be driven, who pays for the gas, what will be the charge for the use of the vehicles, or must rented vehicles be used, and insurance coverage are only a few of the things that need to be determined. In addition, the travel schedule for the quarter/semester or for the academic year will need to be determined. The amount of travel is directly related to the overall budget concerns and must be considered in determining the size of the budget needed for a program. Another way of looking at it could be to state that the size of the budget will determine how many tournaments a team may attend as well as the number of students that may be involved in the program.

**Supervision/Direction of the Program:** As stated earlier, whether it is a student run program or a faculty directed program, someone must be recognized as being in charge. This individual will need to be aware of school policies regarding not only the behavior of the students on the team, but also their own behavior on campus as well as off-campus. Serving as representatives of a university or college when traveling to and attending a tournament, all must recognize that the behavior of a team will have a direct relationship to the

College/University and the unit under which the team is operating. This would also include such things as what to do in case of an emergency in terms of travel and any medical issues.

**Team Matters:** Numerous factors entered into the question of starting a team. As stated earlier, the philosophy of the program will have a direct relationship to this issue. The recruitment of students will be a primary concern as one begins, and then later an on-going concern in order to maintain a program. The size of the program will be related to the number of students necessary to recruit as well as be related to the overall budget and how that budget money is determined. For instance, if the money comes from a student allocation fund, it may be necessary to show that the program involves as many students as possible. This is why it is important to know under what rules and procedures the program will be evaluated. In addition, the intra-relationship among the team members themselves will need to be considered. Will it be a team, or will it be a collection of individuals? The answer to this question and the leadership style of the person in charge of the program will determine just what type of forensic organization will evolve.

In starting a team, the immediate short-term goal of having a team and going to tournaments is usually the prime objective. In the first year of a new program, goals may need to be very general and may be directed to just keeping the team alive. However, if one really wants to establish a forensic team/program, one should be concerned with the survival of that program. The survival of a program requires that new recruits continue to join the team. They must want to come out. Attention should be given to the aspect of "team building" to insure that after the current year, there will still be a "team" and that it will continue after the initial organizer has graduated or the faculty member in charge has moved on to a new position. Here are a few ideas and suggestions for improving a team and team building:

#### **GOAL SETTING:**

- Set team goals for the year consistent with budget and resources available.
- Set a short-term goal targeting a particular event.
- Take into account:
  - o Shared vision (common goals)
  - o Teamwork
  - o Individual-team accountability
  - o Team identity
  - o Positive team culture and cohesiveness
  - o Open and honest communication

**TEAM MEETING:**

- Prioritizes needs
  - o How do you plan on achieving them
- Evaluate progress toward goal achievement
- Deal with conflicts, work together to problem solve
- Forum to focus on goals and training

**BUILDING TRADITIONS:**

- Team Song(s)
- Team Shirts
- Team retreats at the beginning of the year
- Team dinners
- Team parties
- Team historians (documenting the year with quotations said throughout the year, pictures, etc.)
- Building a history of success (keeping old postings, tracking successful competitors)
- Spending time together socially
- End of year banquet
- Top Ten Lists - made up about the last tournament and shared at the meetings
- Warm-ups
- Recognizing achievement throughout the year in the meeting
- Attending out-rounds to support teammates
- Van ride conversations
- Workshops and workdays
- Special "far away" tournaments to reward hard workers

Once all of the work has been done to get a team together, thoughts may turn to how does one find tournaments to attend. There are numerous ways this can be accomplished. The first is to call other forensic programs in your area - check with the coach there to find out about tournaments. They will be willing to help you out. In addition, two of the national individual events organizations, the National Forensic Association (NFA) and the American Forensic Association (AFA), both publish a yearly calendar of forensic tournaments across the nation. The National Forensic Association calendar can be accessed on their web page, but in order to receive the American Forensic Association's calendar, the school must be a member of the AFA. Depending upon where you are located there may be forensic leagues which hold a series of one or two day tournaments. They are good places for a team to begin building their forensic experience.

If the team decides to have a goal of getting students to a national tournament, the decision will need to be made as to which national tournament. This may be based on what type of program is being built as well as to whether the school

is a 4 year or 2 year institution. There are numerous forensic organizations, such as Delta Sigma Rho- Tau Kappa Alpha (DSR-TKA) or Pi Kappa Delta (PKD) for 4 year institutions, and Phi Rho Pi for 2 year schools. There are a number of other organizations that could be appropriate for your institution and all can be reached via checking out their web pages or obtaining their address by checking with other coaches in your area. Do not be afraid to ask for help from others.

The legwork necessary to start a forensic program will not be easy as can be seen by the foregoing material. There are numerous hurdles that will need to be jumped, but if careful attention is paid to the details, if the dedication is there by the person attempting to start the program, as well as in the students that will be the first team members, it will prove to be a very rewarding achievement. The participants in the program will gain not only skills that will help them in their choice of careers but will also enable them to live a fuller and more rewarding life.

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