

Evolving the Role of College Student Coaches in High School Forensics

by

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Collegiate and high school forensics programs share a unique relationship. Forensics activities such as individual events and debate open up a new world of extra-curricular involvement and act as a conduit to direct students to colleges and universities, especially for those interested in forensics competition at the collegiate level. Collegiate forensics in turn is often the base of new argument types, performance selections, and speaking styles that diffuse into the high school level. The relationship is fueled by the interaction of high school competitors, collegiate competitors and coaches. The proliferation of summer debate and individual workshops has increased this contact between the high school and collegiate communities at all levels of intensity and understanding. Generally, this process has been well received by high school coaches and students alike, who benefit from learning about different perspectives and applying their newfound knowledge in their respective

competition spheres. An issue of increasing importance in high school forensics programs is the role of college debate and individual event competitors as coaches. There are many benefits from having college students involved with high school programs and I would like to advance some suggestions to evolve the role of student coaches further.

First, it is important to identify some potential pitfalls in the use of college competitors as coaches. Recognizing these limitations can help better direct the involvement of college students more and optimize the benefits for all involved. I am still surprised by a pattern I have seen in high school programs that graduate students interested in returning their first year in college to coach. More often than not the college student works with the high school program for about a year and then either they become involved heavily with college forensic competition, focus more closely on their academic course load or become involved with other activities. Unfortunately, many times the drop in interest has detrimental effects on the high school program, especially if the program lacks support or might not have an involved coach or sponsor. It is necessary to find a way to make the process of assisting high school forensics programs more rewarding and personally enriching.

Another dilemma

occurs when the college student-coach either accepts a role as researcher or falls into a position where they become the major source of team evidence or literature selections and cuttings. Some of the more vocal complaints about college participation in high school forensics stem from this level of involvement. Rather than instructing and teaching high students how to cut literature, compile debate evidence or find topics for speeches, college student-coaches emphasize a method that creates dependency rather than self-sufficiency. To move beyond this obstacle, it is necessary to direct college student-coaches to become a larger part of the education process and not just to facilitate the means to an end.

The role of the student-coach ultimately depends on the high school they assist with and the nature of their own college program. My chief goal in this article is to suggest that the student-coach needs to become more than just a researcher or individual events assistant. Rather, the time is ripe to challenge college student-coaches to become mentors to the high school students. The role of mentor goes beyond sharing speech and debate experience, but rather moves into a relationship that helps high school competitors become more well-rounded, dynamic students. College students have a unique perspective on the process of matriculating into a different level of

education and becoming a part of collegiate forensics. They also have a viewpoint on participating in a new kind of educational environment, one that is often hard for other educators to share with high school students. The premium on attending college is ever increasing for high school students, however college preparation for students is sometimes difficult to attain. College student-coaches can facilitate tutoring on subjects in their major or research interest and add a new dimension to their interaction with high school students. Sharing experiences and helping high school students set goals for academic progress can become a new element of the coaching experience. Better students always make better competitors and it helps set a higher standard for those that participate in the various forensics activities. Programs such as the Urban Debate League facilitate student-coaches for high schools that might not otherwise have access to debate coaches and material. As participants in the process can tell you, the reason those programs have such impact is because the student-coaches do more than just coach debaters about arguments or speaking style. Student-coaches in programs like the UDL quickly evolve into mentors and role models, especially as high school students are exposed to more diverse college debate participants. Evolving the mentoring

process for more of the college student-coaches involved in high school can open new opportunities for high school competitors and enrich the learning process for college students.

I have discovered that nothing helps reinforce collegiate competitors' own technique and speaking style better than seeing some of their students deal with similar difficulties. Recognizing their own "bad habits" in their students not only means that they have to help train the high school students how to overcome the incapacity, but that they self-reflect on their own approach. Tutoring students in academic areas can have similar benefits for college students, especially to reinforce participation in their own classes. Motivation is sometimes a difficult resource to harness in forensic competitors and I think that if there are mutually reinforcing patterns stemming from mentoring then it is possible to challenge high school and college students to rise to the occasion. Additionally, coaching helps college students learn more about leadership and the need to maintain professionalism in their status as high school instructors. These lessons can be useful to student-coaches as they become more involved in the academic process and especially if they are considering teaching or becoming part of the educational system.

While my core sugges-

tions are aimed at evolving the role of the college student-coach and the interaction between high school coach and student-coach, there are some possibilities to streamline collegiate participation as well. First, college directors of forensic programs should take an active role in building program connections to high schools, especially in areas that might be regionally constrained. A number of college coaches have already nurtured long term relationships of this nature and should try to generate support for other college programs and insure that a wide spectrum of interests are covered. Since high schools have a wider participation spectrum in debate and individual events there is a greater need to spread the word around college programs that have the requisite background and experience. Rather than privileging one style or event type, college coaches can facilitate network construction with different college programs that support different styles of debate and individual events.

Summer high school institutes do a great job laying a framework for networking between college debaters and high school students, but being able to integrate high school coaches more in these programs would result in greater benefits. College programs can facilitate this by preparing curriculum and even offering continuing education credit to participants. Instructional seminars on the

use of college student-coaches can be incorporated into this learning experience. College coaches and their high school counterparts can address a focus on competition pedagogy, responsibility training, conduct, travel responsibilities, and liability issues. Evolving this process for high school coaches exposes them to a wider range of information and can be beneficial in terms of finding college student-coaches for their respective programs.

Many colleges and universities have developed teaching and tutoring programs that are tasked with fostering on-campus academic resources. Programs of this nature can develop curriculum and provide insight on how to prepare college students for the task of mentoring and tutoring. College coaches can best facilitate building a connection between these programs on campus and the high school forensics programs. Additionally, coaches can direct recruiters that are already a part of the college and university system towards these mentoring programs. As colleges and universities seek to diversify their campus population, the well-rounded forensics student can be an appealing addition.

High school and college forensics already share undeniable bonds, but by evolving the important link between college coaches and high school forensics programs it is possible to strengthen and enrich those bonds. My suggestions empha-

size connections that already exist and an infrastructure that can be accessed on most college campuses. Building a forensics community that can overcome existing obstacles and provide enhanced benefits for its participants is a goal worthy of increased effort and attention.

