

# A STUDY OF FORENSIC ACTIVITY IN FLORIDA HIGH SCHOOLS

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## Purposes and Procedures

This analysis of high school debate programs in the state of Florida arose out of conferences with various high school debate coaches. There was great uncertainty among coaches regarding the debate programs being run at other high schools in the state and in the region in general. The lack of any published material of this nature suggested that a thorough study of the high school debate programs was needed.

To collect data needed to resolve this uncertainty, a survey was conducted in the larger high schools in a fourteen-state area in the South. This article presents data for the state of Florida and compares them with data gathered in adjoining states. Specific identification of high schools has not been made since many directors indicated a desire to protect the anonymity of their returns. Returns were received from 67 of 93 high schools surveyed. A follow-up questionnaire was sent to those schools which initially did not respond. A variation of percentages occurred as a result of some of the respondents failing to fill in the questionnaire completely.

## Results

The first analysis contained in Table I deals with the extent of high school debate activity found over a two year period. Of the three states--Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, Florida is the only one which has shown an increase in activity during the two year period.

The analysis of the number of tournaments attended by the debating high schools is exceedingly important since tournament activity forms the main core of the debate program. It is through tournaments that the students get the educational experience which justifies existence of the debate programs. It is clearly indicated that, though a smaller percentage of Florida high schools engage in debate than is the case in Alabama, those schools which do debate attend many more tournaments. The changes from 1957-1958 to 1958-1959 indicate a decrease in both the extremely active and the extremely inactive debate programs. There appears to be a definite trend of the high schools to stabilize at some point between seven and ten tournaments per year.

Table 1

Tabular comparison of High School Debate Activity  
in the States of Florida, Alabama and Georgia

| Survey Areas  | States |      |     |
|---|--------|------|-----|
|   | Fla.   | Ala. | Ga. |
| Responding schools with active programs--percentages  | 69     | 83   | 45  |
| Average tournaments attended, 1958-1959               | 6      | 1.6  | 1.8 |
| Average tournaments attended, 1957-1958               | 6      | 1.6  | 2.3 |
| National Forensic League membership--percentages      | 38     | 40   | 20  |
| Programs with budgetary appropriations--percentages   | 62     | 20   | 0   |
| Average budget--dollars                               | 226    | 50   | 0   |
| Debators actively participating--percentages          | 75     | 93   | 78  |
| Coaches with previous training in speech--percentages | 62     | 68   | 40  |
| Coaches who participated in debate--percentages       | 46     | 50   | 60  |

Financial considerations are an important aspect of the debate program. It costs money to attend tournaments. To make effective use of the money appropriated or available for debate activities during the year, the debate director should know in advance how much money he is going to have. The figures reported indicate the percentage of the reporting high schools in each of the states that had a specific budgetary appropriation. Florida leads the other two states in efficient financial procedures in the debate area. Nevertheless, approximately thirty-eight percent of the Florida debate coaches do not know at the start of the season how much money they will have available. Though it is clear that the average appropriation for debate purposes in Florida is considerably larger than in Alabama or Georgia, it would be a mistake to assume that the high schools in Georgia had no money available. The funds spent on debate there do not come from

specific budgetary appropriations, but as in the case of the other high schools that do not have specific appropriations, their funds are obtained from a wide variety of means including candy sales, dances and other fund raising activities frequently supplemented by parental support. Also falling into this class, are those schools in which money is provided on a tournament-to-tournament basis by the principal.

Since debate is an educational activity, an important aspect of the program is a consideration of how many students are given an opportunity to receive the educational benefits it offers. In judging "opportunity" there are two relevant bases: (a) the size of the debate squad and (b) the percentage of that squad which gets debate participation. Florida has clearly the largest debate squads of any of the three states. Although Florida debaters attend more tournaments, they do not do so in proportion to their larger squads, thus reducing the percentage of participating debaters.

The last analysis dealt with the preparation of directors of debate for that activity. In general, the number of debate directors having had actual debate experience is very low.

#### Summary

On most bases, the high school forensics program in Florida compares favorably with similar programs in neighboring states. The survey suggested points at which improvements could be made. Provisions should be made to increase the percentage of students who actually participate in debate competition. Debate directors who have had a sound preparation for that activity should be sought. The reader should remember, when considering the budget figures, that some of the high schools that do not have a specific budgetary appropriation may actually have larger amounts of money available than some of the high schools which report specific appropriations. Needless to write, there is no implication that because the average appropriated budget in Florida exceeds that in its bordering states, that such budget is ideal or fully adequate. In general, it tends to fall somewhat below the averages that we have found in some other states. The amount of money to be spent on debate should be determined in accord with the number of students who should participate and the breadth of experience they should have. The amount should not be set on the basis of the amount being spent by neighboring schools.