

Getting the Most Out of Competitions and Continuing Education Programs

Stone Soup Dispute Resolution Knowledge Project
hosted by the University of Missouri School of Law
Center for the Study of Dispute Resolution



We often miss opportunities to generate and share knowledge about actual practice from student competitions and continuing education programs. This describes some ways to get more benefit from these activities.

Unfortunately, the feedback at school's skills competitions usually is limited to the small group of students in each performance. The panels of judges often include both academics and practitioners, whose assessments sometimes overlap and sometimes don't. Usually, there is no effort to systematically compare their assessments.

To harvest the benefit of these discussions, competition organizers could hold a follow-up event in which student competitors and judges could discuss general issues in the students' performances without identifying any students. This would be a great opportunity for academic and practitioner judges to discuss their perspectives, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement. It should provide a terrific learning experience for everyone. It might be particularly valuable for students who feel upset because they used techniques taught in class, only to be criticized by practitioner-judges.

It should be pretty easy to organize a general debriefing event following the competitions. Ideally, it would be scheduled well in advance so that invitations to potential judges would include the date, time, and location of the event. Presumably, competition judges could get CLE credit for attending the event – and actually learn a lot more than from the judging experience itself. Light refreshments could be provided as an extra incentive for students to attend. Although this event presumably would be of interest primarily to the student competitors and judges, it could be open to everyone in the school and perhaps the local practitioner community as well.

The event could be run like a [“focus group class,”](#) with selected speakers on a podium, or as a general discussion moderated by a faculty member. To identify issues for discussion, event organizers might ask for suggestions from students in the competition and review judges' scoring sheets.

Getting More Out of Continuing Education Programs

Continuing education programs provide another great opportunity to expand our understanding of practitioners' perspectives.

Many speakers get some basic information from the audience as part of their talks. It is not unusual to ask for a show of hands about the audience and their experience. For example, speakers might ask members of the audience about their practices (e.g., as an advocate, mediator, arbitrator), amount of experience, types of cases handled, etc.

It would take just a little extra planning to elicit more substantive information at the outset and at various times during the programs – and then feed it back to the audience as part of the programs.

Speakers could elicit responses by having people raise their hands, complete short surveys, meet in small groups to discuss specific questions, use “clickers,” or perhaps use other techniques.

Ideally, organizers would arrange for some way to record the audiences' responses, perhaps by typing them into a document projected on a screen or collecting survey forms. Any data collected could be written up and circulated to attendees after the program.

The conversation between the program organizers and speakers could address whether something like this would be appreciated and, if so, what questions would be good to ask. At a recent ABA conference, for example, there was a program in which the attendees were asked what they would like to know about negotiation and this produced a [valuable list of questions](#).

In addition to producing information for the program participants, academics could collect data that could contribute to their scholarship. For some examples, see the federal court clerk, cooperative lawyer, and quality of mediation studies described in [this blog post](#). Of course, academics who want to use the data for their scholarship should get approval from the school's IRB or comparable ethics board.