



Curricular Toolkit

Braver Angels Debates for the Classroom and Campus



Braver Angels

BridgeUSA 

Braver Angels debates aim to facilitate honest, authentic, respectful dialogue on controversial propositions. Participants do not focus on “winning” the debate and “defeating” their opponents. Rather, they join together in a collective exploration of a topic to better understand each other and their various positions. The light parliamentary format requires that all questions be addressed to the chair and reduces the potential for hostile reactivity. Emphasis is placed on lived experiences and each individual’s relationship with the topic. This activity can be used for a campus-wide event or class assignment.

A **campus debate** is typically hosted by a student club or co-curricular program, supported by a faculty member or staff leader. [The College Debates and Discourse Alliance \(CD&D\)](#) team will assist with every step of planning, and provide a chair to moderate the debate. This type of event can be open to the public, and even coordinated with and co-sponsored by outside parties (e.g., alumni groups), as desired.

A **class assignment** can be developed to include all students in face-to-face and online settings. Every student who speaks will create a debate brief before the day of the debate. A good brief includes two well-constructed arguments and a closing statement. It also contains examples that help humanize each argument and provides opportunities for empathy and understanding. This assignment utilizes the Toulmin Model for constructing arguments. However, it can still be used successfully by instructors who are not familiar with the model.

Because of the activity’s emphasis on depolarization, what is most essential is your setup. For example, students

should know in advance that they should approach the conversation with “humility, not hostility,” and that they should be honest about their own positions while seeking to understand why others might hold different ones. As you adapt the assignment for your needs, take care to keep this part of the assignment at the forefront.

Your curricular toolkit includes the following components:

- [A fact sheet describing Braver Angels Debates.](#)
- [A step-by-step process for getting started with constructing a class assignment.](#)
- [Resources for creating a classroom assignment.](#)

We are here to help! If you have questions or need help adapting this activity to your course or event, contact:

Mark Urista – uristam@linnbenton.edu

Bryan Paul – wbpaul@goacta.org

Doug Sprei – dsprei@goacta.org



What are Braver Angels Debates?

Braver Angels, ACTA and BridgeUSA have forged an acclaimed national program that teaches students to honor ideological diversity, foster civil discourse on college campuses, and cultivate student and faculty leaders to carry the movement forward.

What are Braver Angels debates for the campus or classroom?

Braver Angels debates provide a transformative experience for students, highlighted by deep listening, critical thinking and thoughtful communication. Engaging with their peers in a guided setting, students debate around polarizing topics, and come away with profound appreciation for free expression and viewpoint diversity.

What does a Braver Angels debate look like?

Braver Angels debates are not competitive or performative events. They are immersive and highly participatory, inviting everyone in the room to freely express themselves in a collective search for truth. Conducted in a light parliamentary format and chaired by trained experts, they teach students to express their views, frame persuasive arguments, and engage respectfully around the most challenging political and social issues dividing our nation today.

- Debates are held in classrooms or campus settings, in-person or on Zoom. They typically run between one hour to two hours and can accommodate small or large groups of students.
- They are led by an experienced chairperson, trained by the CD&D team.
- Students, faculty, or the hosting organization select a topic for their debate. Guided by the CD&D team, they craft a resolution from the topic that will elicit a balanced split of opinions.
- The debate is launched by a set of opening speakers, chosen in advance to speak in favor of or against the resolution.



- Each speaker takes two to four minutes to present their argument, and then answers questions from audience participants, who address their questions to the chair.
- After the opening speeches conclude, all participants in the room are invited to make speeches and ask questions. The debate ends with a lively debriefing session.

What are the responsibilities of students, faculty or organizations that want to host a debate?

- Students and faculty choose the date, time, and location for a campus or classroom debate.
- Guided by the CD&D team, they select a debate resolution and recruit opening speakers.
- For campus debates, the CD&D team can create Eventbrite listings, flyers and promotional materials to help students to publicize the event on campus.
- To plan debates as an engaging *classroom assignment*, faculty use our Curricular Toolkit.
- Here is an hour-long [e-Course](#) to help you learn to chair your debate in the Braver Angels format.

Students and faculty have explored an expansive range of debate topics. Examples include:

Is social media misinformation a threat to democracy?

UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE

Should assault weapons be banned from campus?

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE – KNOXVILLE

Should the government provide healthcare for all citizens?

FROSTBURG STATE UNIVERSITY AND ALLEGANY COLLEGE OF MARYLAND

Is ChatGPT harmful or helpful to higher education?

LINN-BENTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Should police departments be defunded or reformed?

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Should Americans receive Universal Basic Income?

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-CHICAGO

Should our university mandate COVID-19 vaccinations?

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Should parents have the primary say in their child's publicly funded education?

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Should the death penalty be abolished?

UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

Should the U.S. send troops abroad to protect democracies in peril?

XAVIER UNIVERSITY



For more info, visit
goacta.org/initiatives/college-debates

If you are interested in hosting a campus or classroom debate, contact:

Mark Urista
uristam@linnbenton.edu

Bryan Paul
wbpaul@goacta.org

Doug Sprei
dsprei@goacta.org



Organizing Your Debate

Step 1: Connect with CD&D

Identify a day and time you would like to conduct the debate in your class.

Contact the CD&D curricular team:

Mark Urista: uristam@linnbenton.edu

Bryan Paul: wbpaul@goacta.org

Doug Sprei: dsprei@goacta.org.

The CD&D team will connect you with a trained chairperson who will facilitate your debate and assist with preparation.

Step 2: Introduce assignment to students

Provide an overview of the assignment within the context of your class

Goals

- Discuss tough topics, meaningfully, with people who disagree.
- Foster understanding across perspectives.
- Honor diversity's role in our democracy.

Guidelines

- This is not about winning or losing, it's about *understanding*.
 - Be humble rather than hostile.
 - Listen with empathy, rather than criticism (why might they believe this?).
 - Use "I" language, not "you" language.
 - Use your own words, not popular slogans.
 - Display openness, both as you share and as you listen.
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Step 3: Selecting a topic

It's typically best to brainstorm and come up with several controversial topics that will elicit a diverse array of viewpoints from your students. You can consider local, national, and international topics. In general, current events, conflicts, and issues covered in your class can provide good ideas. [See page 9](#) for a list of sample topics that students and faculty across the nation have crafted with the CD&D team.

After identifying several possible topics for your debate, you can use our suggested template (see the links below), to make a poll that can be sent to students. The poll asks them to rank the suggested topics in order of preference. The results will help you determine which topic 1) most appeals to students, and 2) offers the most even split of participants who stand in favor of or against the resolution.

To copy our suggested survey template that you can edit to fit the needs of your classroom, [click here](#). (Note: this link will only work if you are logged into a Google account.) If you are unable to access the file via a Google account to make a copy, you can [click here](#) (no login required, to view the questions you will want to adapt and incorporate a poll of your own design, on whatever platform is most appropriate for your students.

Step 4: Crafting the resolution from your topic

Once you and your students have selected a topic, the next step is to convert it into a resolution, which is a declarative proposition. For example, if the topic of your debate is about whether COVID-19 vaccinations should be mandated, you would write your resolution as:

- Resolved: COVID-19 vaccinations should be mandated.
-

Step 5: Creating a debate brief

Some students may be nervous about speaking in front of their peers. There are many reasons for this. Regardless of what is driving their fears, preparation is key for building confidence.

Each student should research the debate topic and create a brief for the side they favor. A student's brief should have well-constructed arguments that are supported with evidence and examples that provide appropriate emotional appeals. Additionally, students should be encouraged to share their lived experiences whenever possible.

Step 6: Selecting initial speakers

Opening speakers set the debate in motion and provide a model for other students, inspiring them to frame their own arguments and ask questions of speakers. Opening speeches can be up to four minutes long.

You should be selective when choosing who will deliver the first four speeches (two for the affirmative, two for the negative). Before the debate, approach students whom you think will perform these important roles well.



Resources for Creating a Classroom Assignment

This assignment will have two parts: 1) constructing a brief, and 2) participating in a class debate. The resolution everyone will be using for this assignment is: **[insert resolution here]**. You will need to choose whether you support or oppose this resolution.

Brief

Create two arguments that support your stance on the resolution. Remember, each argument must include a claim, source, and evidence.

- Each claim should be a single declarative sentence.
- Each source should be credible. Clearly label the source, the source's qualification, and date of publication. Do not use the same source twice.
- Your evidence from the source should be succinct and only contain the relevant information that is necessary for supporting the claim.

You also need to write an explanation under each argument. Each explanation should provide a concrete example and analysis for your argument.

Here is a [template](#) for you to create your brief. In addition to your two arguments, you will also need to provide a definition of key terms in the resolution, a one paragraph summary of the controversial issue that will be debated, and a one paragraph central narrative that provides an overview of your position on the resolution. See the following [model](#) for an example of the brief you will need to create (please note that it has examples for both sides of a resolution).

Your brief and speech during the debate will be evaluated using the rubrics below.



Debate

We are scheduled to have a final synchronous class session during our final exam session. Please be prepared to deliver a four-minute speech and provide at least one question directed towards another student who has delivered a speech. Your brief should help you organize your thoughts so you can be clear, concise, and substantive. Please practice delivering your information in advance. More details will be provided at the start of our class session.



Rubrics

The following sample rubrics can be scaled to whatever point value you assign, and weighted according to your course goals.

Brief Rubric

| Criteria | Effective | Moderate | Ineffective |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Summary of Issue | Student provides a concise summary of the debate issue and defines key terms. | Student somewhat demonstrates they understand the debate issue and defines some key terms. | Student fails to demonstrate they understand the debate issue and does not offer a clear and engaging opening statement. |
| Argumentation | Brief contains two well-constructed arguments. Each contains a claim, source, and evidence. | Brief contains one well-constructed argument. It contains a claim, source, and evidence. | Arguments in the brief are poorly constructed. |
| Sources | Student has a credible source that is properly labeled for both arguments. | Student has a credible source that is properly labeled for a single argument. | Arguments lack credible sources that are properly labeled. |
| Examples and Stories | Brief contains an engaging example or story after each argument. | Brief contains an engaging example or story after one argument. | Brief does not contain an engaging example or story. |



Debate Rubric

| Criteria | Effective | Moderate | Ineffective |
|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Organization | Speech has a clear intro, body, and conclusion and is delivered within the assigned time. | Speech is satisfactorily structured and is delivered within the assigned time. | Speech is poorly structured, difficult to follow, and is over or under the assigned time. |
| Argumentation | Student delivers two arguments with proper oral citations. | Student delivers one argument with a proper oral citation. | Student does not deliver proper oral citations. |
| Examples and Stories | Student shares an engaging example or story after each argument. | Student shares an engaging example or story after one argument. | Student fails to provide an engaging example or story during their speech. |
| Civility | Student displays civility towards other debate participants. | Student struggles to listen to others or keep cool during debate. | Student displays blatant hostility during the debate. |
| Participation | Student asks a question after two speeches. | Student asks a question after one speech. | Student does not ask any questions. |



CD&D topics for resolutions

(Sampling of actual topics chosen by students and faculty; updated October 2023)

Speech and free expression

- Should colleges disallow controversial speech that could be construed as hate speech?
- Should college campuses disinvite speakers whose ideas can be construed as “cancellable”?
- Should our college ban speakers with controversial views?
- Should colleges impose limits on speech on their campuses?
- Should social media corporations have control over what is said on their platforms and who can use them?
- Is cancel culture erasing free speech in America?
- Is social media misinformation a threat to democracy?
- Is deplatforming a valid act on college campuses?
- Does regulating social media content do more harm than good?

Abortion

- Without access to abortion, can women achieve equality with men?
- Do the rights of an adult woman take precedence of the rights of a fetus?
- Should abortion have no restrictions within the United States?

Healthcare

- Is healthcare a human right?
- Should everyone be required to receive a COVID vaccine?
- Should our college require COVID vaccination for students and staff?
- Do public health considerations outweigh individual civil liberties?
- Should government provide healthcare for all citizens?

CD&D topics for resolutions, continued

- Does the government have the right to impose mandatory quarantines that deprive individuals of freedom of movement?

Gun Control

- Should the U.S. implement more restrictive gun laws to reduce crime?
- Should assault weapons be banned?
- Should guns be banned on college campuses?
- Should average U.S. citizens be able to possess semi-automatic guns?
- Should the Second Amendment be abolished?

Assorted Topics

- Should Greek life institutions be eliminated from our campus?
- Should monuments that are perceived as symbols of racism, such as Confederate statues, be removed from public view?
- Should the U.S. government implement reparations for historic racial injustices?
- Should police departments be defunded?
- Should local governments defund police departments and redirect funds toward alternative solutions for public safety?
- Should there be term limits for the Supreme Court?
- Do requirements for voter identification cards and restrictions on mail-in ballots suppress voting rights of minorities?
- Should non-discrimination laws take precedence over religious liberty?
- Should schools teach about racism?
- Should schools teach Critical Race Theory?
- Does a commitment to civility take care of diversity, equity and inclusion issues?
- Should our immigration laws be changed to allow for quicker citizenship?
- Should children born on U.S. soil to non-citizens automatically have U.S. citizenship?
- Should the U.S. remain the world's hegemonic power?
- Should women in the U.S. military be assigned combat roles?

- Should the U.S. adopt a completely open borders policy?
- Should the U.S. build the southern border wall?
- Should the U.S. military intervene in response to human rights violations?
- Should journalists value objectivity over advocacy in reporting?
- Should the minimum wage be raised at the Federal level?
- Should transgender athletes compete in women's sports?
- Will transgender athlete participation end women's sports?
- Did the Portland protests do more harm than good?
- Should Americans receive Universal Basic Income?
- In the U.S., should the states develop their own climate change policies?
- Should North Carolina's Senate pass the Parents Bill of Rights? (SB49)
- Should student loan debt be forgiven?
- Does society unfairly prioritize sports over music and arts programs?
- Should the drinking age be lowered to 18?
- Does science compel us to accept that the human condition should be improved by genetic engineering?
- Should the death penalty be abolished?
- Should physician-assisted suicide be legalized?
- Is home schooling preferable to public K12 education?
- Should the U.S. Federal Government should have full control over all K-12, public school curriculum?
- Should colleges adopt a zero-tolerance policy for academic dishonesty?
- Do online college classes do more good than harm?
- Is ChatGPT a threat to higher education?
- Does AI provide more benefit than harm to humanity?
- Is climate change an existential risk?
- Should the states enforce their own policies pertaining to climate change?

Template for Debate Brief

Resolution:

Opening Statement:

Claim 1:

Source:

Evidence:

Explanation:

Claim 2:

Source:

Evidence:

Explanation:

Closing Statement:

Bibliography

Sample Braver Angels Debate Brief

Student's first and last name

Resolution: The costs of higher education outweigh the benefits.

Affirmative Speech

Opening Statement: Almost all of us have been told that a college education is the ticket to success. However, declining enrollment numbers suggest that many are starting to question this proposition and view the costs of a college education outweighing the benefits. Personally, I've seen several friends decide to enter the workforce rather than go to college. Today, they make more money and have less debt than other friends who earned bachelor's degrees. After researching this topic, I believe the evidence clearly demonstrates that many people would be better off not attending college.

Claim 1: College graduates are burdened with a high amount of debt.

Source: Project on Student Debt (**source**)

The Institute for College Access and Success (**qualification**)

projectonstudentdebt.org published October 2012 (**source & date**)

Evidence: "Two-thirds of college seniors who graduated in 2011 had student loan debt, with an average of \$26,600 per borrower."

Explanation: After completing college, many graduates envision traveling, purchasing a home, and buying goods like a new vehicle. Unfortunately, these purchases can end up being out of reach due to monthly student loan payments. My brother graduated 10 years ago and is still paying off his student loans. He has been unable to buy a house and is still driving his 1999 Honda Accord. Additionally, a large amount of debt can contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. My brother feels hopeless and often questions his choice to attend college.

Claim 2: Students don't learn much in college.

Source: Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (**source**)

Professors of Sociology (**qualifications**)

NYU & Univ. of VA (**backing**)

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (**source**)

Published January 2011 (**date**)

Evidence: "About 45% of students showed no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their first two years of college."

Explanation: College is supposed to help students learn and grow. However, this data demonstrates that this doesn't occur for nearly 1 in 2 undergraduates. Many of the college classes I took involved memorizing a bunch of information and regurgitating it for a test or quiz. Taking classes with "easy A" instructors pretty much guarantees that if you do just enough work, you'll be able to pass with at least a C. Overall, most of the GE classes I took during my first two years of college felt meaningless and simply satisfied boxes I needed to check off my graduation worksheet in order to get a degree.

Closing Statement: Education is important. However, college isn't the only place to get it. The abundance of resources available to the public today allows almost anyone to educate themselves without racking up a larger amount of debt. Libraries offer a large and diverse range of books, artwork, and music that are featured in college classes. YouTube has an impressive collection of lectures from well-respected scholars that are equivalent, if not better, to what you would hear in a classroom. Additionally, many companies provide boot camps and apprenticeships to help you acquire the skills necessary to secure a good-paying job. This training is more focused on real-world skills than what you'll find in most college courses. They tend to be cheaper, too. Across the nation, we're seeing a drop in college enrollment for a good reason, the costs of higher education outweigh the benefits.

Bibliography

Claim 1: "Student Debt and the Class of 2011 -Ed." *Project on Student Debt*, The Institute for College Access and Success, Oct. 2012, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537338.pdf>.

Claim 2: Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Student's first and last name

Resolution: The costs of higher education outweigh the benefits

Negative Speech

Opening Statement: College is popular for a simple reason: the benefits far outweigh the costs. Despite recent criticism, evidence shows that higher education offers a ladder of upward mobility to those who graduate. Moreover, college offers an opportunity for transformational growth that will help an individual develop agency and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

Claim 1: College graduates with a BA earn more than those with less education.

Source: Pew Research Center (**source**)

Non-partisan fact tank (**qualification**)

The Rising Cost of Not Going to College (**source**)

Published on February 11, 2014 (**date**)

Evidence: "The median income for young adults with a B.A. is \$45K compared to \$30K for those with a two-year degree or some college and \$28K for those who only have a high school diploma."

Explanation: College may be expensive, but the extra money a graduate will earn provides more than enough money to pay off student loans and enjoy a middle-class lifestyle. My cousin paid off his student loans in less than five years and today has a good job, a house, a retirement plan, and money for travel and leisure. His brother only has a high school diploma, rents an apartment, has no savings or investments, and lives paycheck to paycheck.

Claim 2: College trains the mind for a globalized world that is constantly evolving

Source: A.G. Lafley (**source**)

Former Proctor & Gamble Chairman (**qualification**)

Supply Corps Officer, US Navy (**backing**)

Huffington Post article: *A Liberal Education: Preparation for Career Success* (**source**)

Last updated on February 5, 2012

Evidence: "Completing a broad liberal arts curriculum should enable a student to develop the conceptual, creative, and critical thinking skills that are the essential elements of a well-exercised mind."

Explanation: It's very rare for a person to work with the same organization for their entire career. Jobs are also changing at a rapid pace--many of the positions that people will be applying for a decade from now either don't currently exist or require problem-solving skills that few people possess. College teaches a person how to think and is one of the best ways to prepare for an uncertain future. During the Great Recession of 2008, my girlfriend was a graphic designer and her firm laid off a bunch of people. She kept her job and was promoted to a newly created position. Her supervi-

sor said it was because she was consistently the only employee who stayed on top of software updates and was not only able to teach herself but was also able to train others. My girlfriend credits her experiences in college as developing her ability to do this.

Closing Statement: I showed up at my local community college as a high school dropout who could barely hold a job. At the time, I was immature, had poor time management, and no direction in life. During my time in community college, I grew into a mature, responsible, and goal-oriented individual. I ended up transferring to a university and, today, have a good-paying career I love that was made possible by the experiences and social network I gained from higher ed. I've seen this story play out time and time again and believe it can be experienced by anyone who is committed to benefiting from their college journey. This is why I believe the benefits of higher ed outweigh the costs.

Bibliography

Claim 1: "Education: The Rising Cost of Not Going to College." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 11 Feb. 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>.

Claim 2: Lafley, A.G. "A Liberal Education: Preparation for Career Success." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 5 Feb. 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-liberal-education-prepa_b_1132511.



Faculty Testimonials

Feedback from faculty members signals their appreciation of this Toolkit's capacity to align with the educational mission of their institution and help them deliver on desired learning outcomes for students.

"I can't tell you how proud I am of the way my students all participated in today's debate on the resolution, *'Science compels us to accept that the human condition should be improved by genetic engineering.'* It was an experiment and I would say it was a good experiment. They looked at the resolution from many points of view and spoke clearly and courageously about how they viewed it. I think we all came away more thoughtful and enlightened. Now that they know the format of the Braver Angels debate, I am guessing the next one will go even better and not only be a good experiment, but a great one."

**-Randy Wayne, Associate Professor of Plant Biology
Cornell University**

"The BA classroom debates were a huge success. I was so impressed by the nuance and vulnerability my students displayed during the conversation. At the end, at least a third of the class indicated they had changed their minds about something because of the speeches. My students decided they wanted to debate on the issue of abortion. I don't normally allow this because I want students to learn to think for themselves, not just to parrot what they've heard on the news or at church. I genuinely believe this was the most nuanced and genuine debate I've ever heard about abortion. I will definitely be conducting a BA debate again, and I'm planning to see about expanding it into more classrooms at my university."

**-Whitney Gent, Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Civic
Engagement
University of Nebraska at Omaha**





“As an instructor, I was exceptionally pleased. It was a fantastic opportunity to give a large class of 180 students the chance to feel like they were participating in a meaningful debate. Our end-of-quarter evaluations also highlighted how much students valued this opportunity. I would happily include this again in my class. Given the impacts on civility and format, next time around I would actually put the Braver Angels debate earlier in the quarter. Thank you all again for helping my class so fundamentally. It was the highlight of the class and the quarter.”

**-Matt McGarrity, Teaching Professor, Department of Communication
University of Washington**

“We hear from many students that hyperpolarization and negative media coverage are driving them away from politics. The Braver Angels debate offered them a different model: one in which they could discuss a controversial issue in a safe space. It was so inspiring to see students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, listen deeply and respectfully to each other, and come away energized and enthusiastically asking Salem State to do this again soon.”

**-Vanessa Ruget, Professor, Politics, Policy and International Relations
Salem State University**

“Any initial apprehension that the students may have had to open up was quickly overcome once the debate began to unfold. It became immediately clear, given the non-confrontational model of directing all questions and responses to the chair, that they were in a ‘safe space’ to speak freely about difficult and, at times, conflicting opinions on the sensitive topic of assisted suicide. The effect of debate on the students as well as the faculty has been thoroughly positive. For many of the students, the debate marked the first time that they felt comfortable in a public setting, not only to speak their minds, but also to *listen* to opinions with which they disagree. . . Everyone who participated in the event unanimously agreed that they would like to have another Braver Angels debate and hoped that this would become a regular event at Molloy University.”

**-Howard Ponzer, Professor and Honor Program Director
Philosophy Department Chair
Molloy University**