

Sadie Webb:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Sadie Webb, associate director of College Debates and Discourse Alliance. And today I'm pleased to share a series of interviews I conducted with students and faculty from our program partner in rural Pennsylvania, Juniata College. After being connected to Juniata staff by a local Braver Angels volunteer, in the spring of 2024 we started our work together by hosting two classroom debates in partnership with the first year seminar course Can We Disagree Agreeably? We then partnered to host a larger campus debate after which this podcast was recorded. These interviews highlight the experiences of our faculty and administrative partners, Matthew Damschroder and Derek James, as well as, the perspectives from several student leaders. They illustrate the way that the College Debates and Discourse Alliance works to foster vibrant relationships with colleges and universities, helping them to develop into strong communities of civil discourse practice.

My name is Sadie and I just finished chairing a debate at Juniata College. We had great attendance about 70 people, and I am here now interviewing some of the folks that helped make this possible. Would you guys each introduce yourselves?

Matthew Damschroder:

I'm Matthew Damschroder. I'm the vice president for Student Life and Dean of students at Juniata in my eighth year here on campus and my first year of teaching a first year seminar with my colleague Derek.

Derek James:

I'm Derek James, dean of equity, diversity and inclusion here. This is also my first time doing this course and I've been here since June of 2023.

Sadie Webb:

Excellent, thank you. And so Matthew and Derek to start, if you guys would just tell me a little bit about why you wanted to work with our program. And then we had a really interesting experience where we started first with two classroom debates and then had a campus debate. What were those like for you guys?

Derek James:

Well, what interested me about this was the opportunity to see students interact around something that is less than mundane, giving them a little spark of volatility sort of in the conversation. And the classroom debates were interesting. I thought that students spoke out well, prepared well, and for those that were more extemporaneous, they did well with that too today. They really did a good job and so I was just happy to see that transformation.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Matthew Damschroder:

We were really brought into the relationship with your organization by a friend of the college and alum who has remained connected and said, "Hey, I see amazing work coming out of this organization." And I know my education at Juniata was characterized by the ability to rigorously engage with material that was uncomfortable for me, and students need that. And so our provost, Lauren Bowen brought the

relationship about and it's really grown and taken on legs that I think have benefited us and resulted in tonight's experience.

Sadie Webb:

Great. So I want to talk about the classroom experience a little bit more in depth. What was organizing and then hosting a classroom debate. Did you guys use the curricular toolkit and how is the work that you did in the classroom really curricularly aligned?

Matthew Damschroder:

We did use so many of the materials that were provided as resources and really helpful, in addition to, numerous consultations. I mean our ability to meet with you over Zoom and have you contribute because new instructors. I mean neither of us are steeped in pedagogy, but we know what learning looks like and more importantly maybe how students show up and how they feel comfortable and safe and expressing themselves that environment.

And so I think we kind of cohered your expertise in ours to create this moment where students had some practice opportunities and then could be models in the larger campus debate and bring other peers into the conversation in ways I wasn't sure I knew or expected would happen. That was a real exciting surprise for me to see.

Derek James:

Yeah, the curricular toolkit was a very useful piece of what we wanted students to pull out of the moments from developing a brief, being able to use a rubric to gauge their own learning or the work that they're trying to produce. And so having those opportunities definitely benefit the students. It's been great to work with Matthew. As a way we have seen the classroom sort of develop the skills of emotional intelligence of being able to speak about a hard subject. So those moments have also been good.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. What class did you guys do this in? It was a first year course, right?

Matthew Damschroder:

It's a first year seminar that is part of our first year curriculum. Students take composition course and then they follow up with a course that extends those writing skills and add speaking and oral communication and critical thinking. And we shaped ours around our interests, which in this case is can we disagree agreeably? Really talking about how do we engage with others and material in constructive ways, and so the course came about as a function of a larger enterprise.

And then we drew in other courses that had adjacent topics on leadership on developing and thinking about personal capacities. And those students showed up and professors as well to this debate, even though it wasn't a core activity for their classes because it contributed in I would say close ways.

Derek James:

Just to reiterate something that I thought was good, seeing the students from other classes also want to participate, have good things to say beyond the extra credit. The added life to today's experience was great to see.

Sadie Webb:

So why this course specifically to work with our program? How are they aligned?

Matthew Damschroder:

Our students, like many students who are of this generation, respond to things that matter or are a part of the curriculum or that their teachers value or that adults kind of bring in. And they want to be rewarded or to feel like they have credit for or some acknowledgement not just the goodwill of them as humans, but some accomplishment or outcome that aligns. And so for us, that means when we have initiatives that we powerfully want to take root on campus, they have to be embedded curricularly. And it made sense for us to think about doing that in a first-year seminar.

There may be other opportunities. And we've tapped partners in politics, we've tapped partners in education, we've tapped partners in some of our other programs to say, how can we extend this work maybe in the disciplines or in the general curriculum or in specific majors, we call them programs of emphasis. But first-year seminar is a way to reach broadly and intensely I think engage with a cohort of students.

And then in the first year, those students will return to us for three more years and can help take what we've laid as a groundwork and extend it to something that is predictable and routine and expected, and kind of begins to become a part of the culture, not just a one-time moment.

Derek James:

Getting into the class, wanting the students to develop skills in discourse and dialogue became important parts of, not only the liberal arts education that these students signed up to get, but also an opportunity for them to develop those skills, the saliency of that coming into a political year.

And so it's good to be around students who in terms of what they're trying to learn as Matthew stated, who will be able to then bring those skills back for the next three years.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah, absolutely. And so what are those skills? And I'd be curious to know how have you seen them develop and grow from classroom debate to classroom debate to campus debate.

Derek James:

For me, I'll take tonight as a chance to say we have a quiet group sometimes, we have a very talkative group sometimes, and it seemed to be that some of our students who have been more reserved in class felt confident tonight to speak.

It was good to see that from the standpoint of new teachers. We're teaching them something, are they learning what we're trying to put across? So those moments are always good. And the questions they asked even drew me in as someone who was just walking around with a microphone, but also seeing the speaker engage with them.

Matthew Damschroder:

I think we also drew on self-efficacy, you talked about confidence, but I would say some of what we tried to develop was information literacy. Students thinking about what sources they were using to draw on as they determined, discerned, figured out their own answer and then maybe to embed some iterative practice. So the model that we drew on that was the model that you provided was really one

where they brought forward a first draft, then they met with someone who helped them shape the writing mechanics of it, and then they turned in a second draft and met with someone who helped them think through the issues. Were they the right questions to be asking? Were they the right arguments to be made?

And then the next step was thinking about how do I persuasively then engage with others? How do I draw them in? How do I help them align with my point of view or at least question their own? To me, that's a process that's far more complex than I think students want to think about or see modeled in the broader culture. And it was interesting to see them begin to buy in to those skills and understand there's value here. Every argument isn't equitable or equal. I've got to bring the right argument in the right context and the right way to make it meaningful.

Sadie Webb:

And so we've talked a bit about why those skills are so important, especially in the higher ed space, but why are those important skills for our citizens to have for everyone living in this country to have?

Matthew Damschroder:

Well, I say, I mean students when they're visiting, I talk about the culture of change agency that's existed as a part of this campus for a long time. People come here to learn, but they come here because they want to make a difference in the world. They want to make it better than they find it. That is historically true of Juniata. And so for them to be able to do that, for them to, particularly in a polarized environment, an environment where it is hard to make progress and the problems are so big and the problems require interdisciplinarity and kind of systems thinking, we need to shape both people who have the capacity to do that work and do it in the right ways with a diverse group of colleagues who are going to both push the boundaries of what they know, even as students push back or accept and grow their own limits.

And so that is the education we need to provide if we're going to follow through on our mission and their aspirations. And this program I think really aligns well with it.

Derek James:

Working in equity, diversity, and inclusion. One of the things you sort of focus your skills on is recognizing that you are better in a more diverse place, you prepare better, you innovate more. And we are seeing that in the thought processes of these students coming from various backgrounds, different ways of learning abilities, so seeing students develop skills that will, as Matthew pointed out, be beneficial when they leave Juniata so they can make a difference, one of my north stars is that that's our goal, why we're here is to develop students who when they leave here will be leaders in the spaces that they go.

And I think seeing them develop some of those, dialectic skills, whether it is being able to speak across difference. Can we learn to listen to one another and not try to beat one another over the head. Someone mentioned right before we started today that sometimes we have more words than fit in the mechanisms to say what we need to say and this opportunity for them I think gave them more of a mechanism to speak their voice.

Matthew Damschroder:

I love what you're saying about growing an idea, connecting to another person's idea that I might be able to get 75% of the way there, but I need your 25 to get over the finish line. That is I think a cohort

characteristic. And they embrace that opportunity to work as a team, as a collective, and it just really plays to their strengths.

The constructive way that the debate is shaped the way that they pick up and extend one another's thoughts and ideas. It was just really inspiring. It made me, my soul happy.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. And that's something we heard a lot in this evening's debrief, but we hear a lot in other debriefs as well, which is when we're asking students and participants, what did you like, what did you learn? What would you tell somebody else about this experience? People say, "Well, as I was listening to folks, my own opinions changed and my own perspective broadened."

And so I'm curious, did you guys have a similar experience in the classroom

Matthew Damschroder:

In terms of seeing people extend their thinking or change their mind, I would say absolutely, and that was true. So we did some test or classroom structured debates with a facilitator who came in to kind of help the students understand the structure. And I think they were also great examples of moments where students took an idea that they had some small background in or had done a little thinking about and then really grappled with it as individuals, as a collective. And we had a classroom debate, but then I saw them, I heard them, I engaged with them after in ways that they were still asking questions about those questions and answering them for each other.

And yesterday I was thinking this, but today I'm thinking that. And yeah, I think that that is a natural outcome of being open to continuing to evolve one's point of view.

Derek James:

The class title being can we disagree agreeably, sort of puts in perspective the gray that a lot of us are in on decisions. Like we might have some strong feelings about certain things, but it's very rarely that you can just paint one issue in one way and everyone want to agree with that or yourself. And so it was interesting to see how many of our students came in with a strong feeling and then ended up being more in the middle of that subject matter.

Sadie Webb:

One of you mentioned at the beginning of this sort of using the two classroom debates you did in your course as a way to sort of ramp up to the campus debate that we did this evening. And so I'm curious if you guys could talk about that and specifically what topics did you guys debate in the classrooms?

And I know you also had kind of a unique approach to finding opening speakers for this evening's campus debate from your classrooms, and so I'd love if you could speak about that as well.

Derek James:

Yeah, so the in-class debates were on AI. Students got a chance to just figure out themselves without a lot of preparation. That was great for them. Giving them a little more preparation for another debate on should parents have curricular, should they be able to make decisions on curriculum in K to 12 schools? It was interesting to see our students have a lot to say about that. I'm a former high school teacher and it gave me a chance to give some input, see where people stand, see where people fall, and so that was interesting, so it prepared them for what we did today.

How we were able to get our opening speakers, Matthew and I had the idea to have our students develop their opening brief as an assignment, as an iterative writing piece and then present those in class. And then silently at the end of class, vote who they think should represent them. It's interesting to see who they chose. And also without you knowing the people that you might be able to talk to and have them debrief, were the same people that we chose and the students chose for themselves.

Matthew Damschroder:

Yeah, interestingly, one of the outcomes of those classroom debates is it reframed what a debate meant to students. And what we heard from them and saw it happen, is people get up bravely to stand in front of peers and say their beliefs, that's really hard in this environment. And there's snapping and there's tapping and there's support regardless of what the point of view is. It's like, I appreciate you for bringing an idea to my attention, for being vulnerable with me, for trusting me to treat you appropriately in the space of that.

And I think for students, as we heard them debrief, they're talking about this debate is inclusive, it's welcoming, the sort of responsiveness isn't. Those questions that people bring forward aren't to put down the speaker or to contest their ideas. It really is to deepen the conversation. And I think having them bought into that to be then present at the campus debate, to say to their friends, "No, this isn't what you think it might be. This is a different kind of thing," and then to sort of model that.

I thought it was powerful and it will help us as we move forward and expand it. I heard students tonight saying, "When's the next one? What's the next topic?" And that's great feedback to have.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah, absolutely. Thinking about these topics, AI and parental rights, they're very complicated topics that many students will have limited experience with. Some will definitely have more experience, but some will have less. And so do you feel like students were still able to engage in these complicated and nuanced topics despite maybe not having a massive amount of expertise in the area?

Matthew Damschroder:

It's interesting. I mean the topics on the surface may be somewhat inaccessible for students, but the core issues aren't. Do I trust systems to make decisions about our collective good without influence? Or what level of influence should users have in shaping the power of these systems that have so much influence, whether that's a school system, whether that's a social platform, the students are getting at their core issues. And letting them them, inviting them to dig a little deeper into what they do know because I mean, they've been subject to systems that they've either found supportive or as obstacles. And they demand that we do better and they do better and those systems do better. They want to be a part of making. And so they're good. I think consumers and scrutinizers of these questions, applying a particular frame to it, gives them the ability to maybe shape it through a particular lens. But the core issues I think are really accessible to them and I saw them digging deep to apply those.

Derek James:

Yeah. I want to bring up a moment in class, one of the things we had them do is, there was a center circle of students and an outer circle of students and the center circle of students had a conversation and in that conversation you would see it develop as we talked about from a surface level to get more in depth. And it always worked like that for that moment in class of seeing students. And then students on the outside got a chance to speak about that experience and then switch.

What I realized at that moment is even when the subject matter might require a little more studying, students have source material from somewhere. Being able to expand it, whether it is just in how thoughtful you're thinking of something or expound on it because you have more thoughts on it. That was a moment in class where we see the students developing those skills.

Sadie Webb:

Matthew, is there a moment that stands out to you from the classroom debates or the campus debate?

Matthew Damschroder:

There was a particular student that came forward at the campus debate and spoke really passionately from their experience as a marginalized individual with an identity that isn't widely, I think understood. I mean it was incredibly brave to sort of share that level of self with the group and then contextualize the question in terms of its impact and its power to maybe do good or do harm. And then ask of themselves and by extension, what does this mean for all of us? What are we going to do to make sure that the good is where we go and the harm is what we avoid? That was a moment that, I mean, it just sits with me. And it was beautiful and heavy at the same time, but I won't forget that anytime soon.

Sadie Webb:

Derek, what about you? I mean, you spoke a bit about what stood out to you in the classroom. Anything really stand out to you from this evening's debate?

Derek James:

The questions. I thought students in the moment were able to really pick up on nuance in a way that I believe some of us don't think they have the skill to do sometimes, is pick up on the nuance of a subject matter or something that is politically charged. And so today to see students pick up on those small details, we'll stand out because it seems like they're really learning. And for some of our students who raise their hand more, who had a lot to say, it was interesting to see those moments of picking up those little things that will stand out because it just was a moment of being proud.

Matthew Damschroder:

Let me, I would say too, I mean just that idea that people have, that students have a 15-second attention span our debate, it could have gone on. I mean if you hadn't called the question and pulled us back together, there were students that would've stuck in that room for a lot longer and continued to hash out these issues. And the time limit, the four-minute time limit, you're like, well, I'll tap my gavel after three and a half minutes. In my mind I'm like, she's not going to have to tap her gavel. I think you did, every time to bring students to bear to further the conversation they have and want the ability to have these deep conversations. And given the space and the trust to do it, I think they really step up.

Sadie Webb:

And it's such a unique experience for so many young people. For Gen Z, especially growing up in the era of social media, I think true engagement with political discourse is often few and far between.

So you guys have a really unique experience having seen a progression with your students from two classroom debates and then to the campus debate. I'm curious if you've seen any changes in student engagement or behavior or thought process as they've engaged with these debates multiple times in a row?

Derek James:

My response was pretty quick. I saw some of the fruit today with how ready the students from our class were to speak about the subject matter. Some of that confidence was built from the practice that they had, the process of writing and getting some tips on how to write the briefs. And seeing them speak eloquently today in a matter of four minutes about a subject matter that was important to them was good to see.

Matthew Damschroder:

I'm excited for class tomorrow. I mean, they show up, they vote with their feeds-

Derek James:

They do.

Matthew Damschroder:

... that this is important because our attendance rates are high. And I don't think it's because of me or you-

Derek James:

Me either.

Matthew Damschroder:

... or us. I mean they really want. They really want this experience. And so even afterwards many of them were like, "Oh, I see you in class tomorrow. Ready to talk about it tomorrow?" That sort of enthusiasm suggests to me that they get it, that they are really excited to see more.

We have a culminating assignment, it's going to be a reflection, their self-reflection on how they've grown and developed and what they've learned. And that will be an exciting, I think thing to grade as exciting as grading can be.

Derek James:

Great.

Matthew Damschroder:

And then to do our own assessment and analysis of our hits, our misses and what we might do and continuing to implement the program.

Derek James:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah, so I have one more question for both of you. You've both spoken a lot about what this work was like from the perspective of an educator. I'm curious if you could speak about the importance of this work from your own individual perspective.

Derek James:

I was thinking about it the other day. Matthew gave a talk in the beginning of the year that has helped me frame conversations. Well, I'm a father of a 14-year-old and a 9-year-old, and it's about putting your strengths in front of your weaknesses. And I don't think our students hear that enough. We're always thinking about what we have to improve and I'm not saying we don't try to improve those moments where we can get better, but that sticks out to me as a chance for our students to recognize that we are in their corner and we're sort of showing you how to build this confidence in a process of at that point there had only been here for a semester and a few weeks. And so learning how to run your highlight tape more than you are your failures, to speak into the importance of emotional intelligence and recognizing that these are things you can improve.

For me, I learned a lot. There were things that I'm taking with me not just as a parent and an educator, but personally to make sure I'm doing more of those things. And then being able to disagree agreeably. Just one moment of, we are in a space where what I do is being denigrated in different states at different levels. And so to be able to then balance conversations about that, recognizing the emotional intelligence needed and then thinking about all of the good things that happened because of what we do. That's a moment for me.

Matthew Damschroder:

I think about the people in my life who, and I'm unrecognizable today like everyone from who I was when I went to college or was even thinking about college. And I think of the folks who invested in me, who heard me say things that were just dismissable or ridiculous or things that even today I would look back and I'd be like, "What was he thinking?" And gave me that opportunity bravely continued to walk down a path with me, embraced my willingness to think about those things with them and then welcome to the changes they saw. I mean that is I think the life of the mind. That is the journey of the liberal thinker. And people gave me those gifts.

And when we live in a world where we are so polarized that we will not give the opportunity to learn, to grow, to challenge them, to ask them to think a little bit more deeply or a little bit more differently, I think we've lost something. And so we want to build a culture on this campus where we'll have braver angels. I mean that name makes so much sense to me that we invite people, to give other people the grace and the space to both be themselves and grow and to the people that they're meant to be and that we will walk that path together. I think that's a special thing and I'd like to see more of it, and I think this is a piece of more of it.

Derek James:

The mechanism of Braver Angels, for those who don't know, it's extremely useful for getting students to talk about topics that we may deem difficult. And so that mechanism, if it can be used in a classroom or in the larger scale debate like we had tonight. There are parts of our institution I had not yet seen being here for 9, 10 months. And so to see that part, I just think it's beneficial. So if people are listening to say, "Should I use this?" The answer is yes.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah, thank you both so much. Really, really appreciate this. And yeah, thanks. I'm going to stop it now.

Matthew Damschroder:

Thank you.

Derek James:

Mm-hmm.

Sadie Webb:

After spending some time chatting with Matthew and Derek the day after the campus debate, I was able to stick around campus and interview a few student leaders to explore what the classroom and campus debate experiences were like from their perspective.

We are recording and I am here with Maddie and Patrick.

Maddie:

Hi, my name is Maddie. I am a freshman here at Juniata College and I'm majoring in environmental engineering.

Patrick:

Hello everyone. Hi. I am Patrick. Freshman at Juniata College. I'm a local, so I know the place very well. I'm math and data science POE and I'm happy to be here.

Sadie Webb:

You guys are both students in Dean Damschroder and Dean James's class, and you also then acted as opening speakers for us at our campus debate last night.

I'd love to hear a little bit about your experience working in the classroom to host and have two different classroom debates and then your experience as an opening speaker for the campus debate.

Maddie:

I definitely saw a definite difference between the classroom debates versus the one that we held in Ellis Ballroom. I would definitely say that the ones in the classroom, I felt like we could hear a lot more voices and people, especially because of how comfortable our class setting is with having Dean Damschroder and Dean James, how comfortable we are speaking.

But then when we moved to the larger scale debate, I definitely saw a lot of my classmates speaking, but I did hear a couple more voices, which I think that the setting of a Braver Angels debate and how it's set up definitely encouraged us hearing new voices, which I thought was a really good experience, especially coming from someone who doesn't normally speak up in other classes, I definitely feel like the way it's set up definitely encourages new voices and new ideas, which is really what debate is all about, not about being aggressive towards each other.

I felt like it was a very neutral. Even though it was a polar idea, it's kind of encourages a middle ground, which we don't really see a lot today.

Patrick:

The difference between our classroom debates and the larger scale campus-wide Braver Angels debate. I saw there was a bigger, much larger scale in terms of both attendance and somewhat pressure to go up and participate. But in the speeches that we saw and the questions that people engaged with, I feel like there was a lot of discovery to be had and people were very interested in how to approach the topic as opposed to having conflicting sides, having their own agendas. It was a lot more welcoming in the fact that people were able to have some civil discourse without aggression, which I thought was really cool.

The model in the classroom, it felt very laid-back. People understood each other a lot, and in general there was a more encouraging approach to participation, but even when expanding to the campus-wide model, it proved to be pretty successful in the way that it brought people in and really took the debate topic to something that could be positively approached.

Maddie:

Oh, I'd just like to add on to that, especially because in the classroom debates we argued different topics. One of them was AI, but it was more of a general sense and the other one was parent involvement in curriculum, which I definitely think both of those are hot topics, but when you narrow it down to something like chatGPT and education, I feel like it's such a new idea that it really encourages hearing other people out.

It was a good way that you come into a debate with kind of the side that you agree with, but especially with something that is that new, it feels like you're able to categorize how you feel based off of what other people's have said, and you're more willing to change your opinion. So especially with new topics that you're forced to pick aside, I definitely think that this is a good way to just make people hear each other out early on before it gets too polarized.

Sadie Webb:

I'd love to hear a little bit about your experience actually developing the topics because your classroom worked with somebody from our national team to develop a variety of debate topics that then you narrowed down to use specifically in your classroom, and then those same debate topics were then used to narrow down the final topic for the campus debate. What was it like as a student selecting what you think would be an important topic for your campus to debate?

Patrick:

The process for deciding our topic started very broad. It started very open. People have obviously a lot of concerns about not only their campus life but their everyday life and concerns with society as a whole, but I felt like we got a greater understanding of what people found to be important, even if the debate is a pretty hot topic, what kinds of things that people did want to discuss with others, even though the platform to do so wasn't necessarily there.

And when it came to narrowing down what we did want to talk about, it was mostly an evaluation of not only popularity but what could be meaningful to our campus. And I think that in our final decision, we found a nice middle ground of something that's not too contentious, that people are coming in with predetermined ideas and without an open mind, but still something that's important to us, and what we think to be a very important part of our future. So I think that the process by which we selected our topic was pretty interesting in the fact that we didn't necessarily have a clear direction to begin with, but eventually that transformed into something that was really positive and I think very effective in the way that we presented it.

Maddie:

Yeah, I also agree that the way we selected was very productive. We got to hear from all of the voices in our classroom. I think that Dean Damschroder and Dean James definitely encourage everybody to speak on a topic that they cared about. And that's really the idea of trying to debate a topic is something that someone cares about. And like Patrick said, I feel it can change when it gets a little bit more contentious, but we did select based off of, we made suggestions and then we voted on what people were interested

in, and then after that we saw how polar it was. So you would either agree affirmative or negative, and using that process to select kind of takes the emotion and bias out of choosing what topic you want to hear about.

And I definitely think in the future for Juniata, if we were to do something like this again, I think that we could pick a more contentious topic because I feel the way that it's set up, emotions can't go flying around, so I felt like the way we chose was very productive, but we could also kind of push our boundaries a little bit next time.

Patrick:

Just to add on to that, along with the way that we chose our topic, we each chose our side of the debate somewhat early on, but eventually when we were brought to the research aspect of it, we were definitely encouraged to take sources not only from our side but from the contrary. And I feel like through that I gained a greater understanding of what kind of scope we're looking at, and in general, what the debate topic is about.

So I feel like a big part of why the argument and the debate was so successful in that regard was that a lot of the students had a broader sense of knowledge in the way that they understand both sides of the argument and how it can be seen in different ways, which really took out from the potential aggression that could come with having conflicting ideals. So having a well-rounded understanding of the topic was really important I think, in finding that good use for our topic and reducing the contention in that sense.

Maddie:

I think that it definitely encouraged more voices because a part of debate is not only the factual research part of it, but also kind of what is coming from your heart. And being an opening speaker, obviously, I planned out what I was going to say and I did research it, but I also was speaking from my heart and then afterward people could also come up and do. So I feel like that's a good opportunity not only to self-cite yourself I guess on a certain topic, but also to cite from research and all that. It's a good combination of both emotion and factual knowledge.

Sadie Webb:

You both mentioned research a little bit, and one of the things about Braver Angels Debates is we don't require people for the larger, for example, like campus debates that we do to conduct research in order to participate, but we have our curricular toolkit where professors often create assignments to help incorporate Braver Angels Debates into their classroom.

And so I would love if you two could speak about the classroom experience and creating a brief conducting research and then putting together your arguments. What was that like?

Maddie:

I really love the process of constructing my brief because it does encourage you paging through sources that are in the negative or in the affirmative of the side that you don't agree with. So not only do you get to hear the voices in class or get to read the briefs of other students that don't agree with you or maybe don't exactly align with all of your opinions. You also by having the process of research and having the process of making a brief, you also get to read people from other sides of the world or different countries in different states. You get to hear everything not only in your own community, which is important in itself, but you also get to hear other voices, different articles, different videos, and the process of making that was really helpful in kind of my general knowledge of a topic.

Patrick:

To add on to the research side and the sources that you can drag from a lot of different places. I found what was really helpful was a lot of the consultation with both our writing associate and either Dean Damschroder or Dean James, depending on who would like to meet with, I think that a lot of the time I would think that my brief was very complete, that it had most of the points that I had and that my argument was fairly complete.

But upon being looked at by a second pair of eyes, I realized that there are a lot of other things that I could cover. There are a lot of perspectives that I could bring in, and in general there was improvement to be had. So a very helpful part in the way that I constructed my brief was that other people were collaborating with me working not only towards furthering my argument or making a better statement, but also just understanding the issue.

I know that Dean Damschroder, who I met with, didn't necessarily hold the same stance as I did, and he brought some excellent counterpoints when reading my brief. So I realized that I had to take a new perspective and really flesh out why I held my ideals and why there were certain more discoveries that had to be made in that regard. But in terms of the public not having to have a research idea when going into the debate, I feel like it could be a little bit of a barrier in the structure. And there's, a lot of the opening speeches were very heavy in evidence and anecdotes that people who are walking in unprepared would not have necessarily ready for such a debate.

So it can be a little bit intimidating to go up in front of everybody and just speak from the heart. But I know that people given such an open platform to discuss their ideas and their stance, there was still some engagement in that sense, but I still see it as an area of improvement.

Maddie:

As far as hearing people, we definitely had a time the day before we actually did the debate, little larger campus debate, we all read our briefs to each other, which I also, like I know my introductory speech was about 20 seconds short of three minutes, and I was like, "I might want to lengthen this." And hearing everyone different voices, especially from my side and the other side as well, it was very helpful, especially seeing how each person had a different approach to how they wanted to present. Like Patrick had said there was more evidence-based, but there were also more self-anecdotes.

Like me personally, what I recognize about his speech is how he used the analysis of a Rubik's cube. I feel like there's so many different ways that someone can approach the same topic. So even if you are having 10 speakers from the same side, you can hear something new and different every time. And I think that that's what research with a combination of each individual person, I think that what helps provide such a variety of ideas.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah, so I think, Patrick, you said this a few moments ago, was you wanted to make sure that this was really impactful for your campus and your community. Do you think that this was an impactful event?

Patrick:

After the event, I actually spoke to one of the volunteers who came up after the debate. He wasn't a designated opening speaker, and furthermore, he wasn't part of the class who played a hand in planning the event and with the way that he conducted himself and the different things that he said, the different ideas that he brought, he said that not only was he able to further reflect on those ideas and either

support or alter them in whatever sense, he said that it was just really nice and interesting to see people even on different sides of the debate, so willing to converse in that sense.

And I feel like just with this story, I know that people definitely walked away from that topic learning more about the other side, about their side and about the issue in general, which I think is pretty big in terms of how it impacts not only the student body, but the body of the campus as a whole.

Maddie:

I think it had a great impact, but I would've liked to, we didn't have about 70 people. I would've liked to see a little bit more students, especially attending and participating, and I feel like that was the main lack of participation that I would've liked to see, especially because of the topic AI and education I feel like I would've liked to hear a lot more student perspectives.

But I did also enjoy how we had professors there as well, giving their two cents and opinions and views on the topic. So I think it was very productive and impactful. And I think it was an overall success, but I definitely would like to have more people and more voices, and that also can encourage more participation when we have more people volunteering to come up to speak.

Sadie Webb:

I have one more question for you guys. We've spoken a lot about the importance of productive dialogue and civil discourse. I'd love to know why is this important to you as individuals?

Maddie:

I think it's important to me because especially living in America, we have so many different, very, very polar issues when it comes to politics. I mean, we have a two-party system where it's very red or blue. There's not really an option for purple, and there's with that also comes with the idea that each side has to agree a certain way on a different issue, that you can't be kind of one way this direction or one way in this direction on certain topics. So I feel like this format of debate definitely encourages listening to both sides and not being so stuck in your ways, which I feel like we often are, we're not willing to hear people out because we're so emotionally charged with certain issues. And I feel like we don't ever slow down or take time to think, why do I think about, like why do I feel this way? Is there evidence or is it just from the heart?

I feel like especially when you slow down and you have time to hear other people out and you're not jumping them with questions immediately and honestly providing a personal attack, which is often what we see in our media, I feel like it's a lot more productive in the sense that you're not arguing the person, you're arguing the topic and you're arguing your own personal beliefs. Rather than standing up there for an hour like a presidential debate where they just yell at each other and make fools of themselves. It's more civil between everybody in the room and it's overall more productive because you're not forced into a polar corner like we usually are.

Patrick:

Yeah, I very much agree with Maddie and her take on how the way the debate has been construed by not only our media, but just the general stigma around the ideas that people have to take sides, people have to argue with each other, people have to win debates. And I really think that it's harmful to the way that not only we conduct ourselves, but also we respect other people. There's a lot of different ideas and there's a lot of different ways that you can develop and hold those ideas, and I think that people should be entitled to their own reasons why they think the way that they do.

And I think that the most important thing about the Braver Angels Debate in this regard is that people have a greater understanding of each other and people have a greater understanding on themselves. There's a very introspective element where you have to kind of reflect on why this topic is so serious and why I stand the way that I do and why other people stand the way that they do. But having that kind of more self-awareness in the way that you conduct yourself in debate is very important in the way that not only we talk about contentious topics, but respect each other as people.

Maddie:

I also agree with what Patrick said, but I think the Braver Angels Debate is something that most people never get to see or never get to experience. And I would definitely recommend it to anybody because it's definitely a new approach. I mean, I remember in my high school debates, there was always a winner. There was always a grade. There was always, "Oh, I'm going to say the wrong thing and people are going to be mad at me," or whatever that would be. I always remember being so scared before going to my high school debates and practicing them.

I mean, yes, it was for grade, but it was also more so the tension that the classroom would hold because that was the way the debate was set up. Whereas from this angle, like a Braver Angels Debate angle, you're not attacking each other as much as you would be in any other setting or any other experience.

I don't love speaking in front of other people. It was a lot more calm and welcoming and encouraged that people like me don't usually speaking in front of others. It was a lot more approachable than your average debate.

Patrick:

Just kind of one more thing to add on to that. The best thing I would say in terms of its inclusivity and its openness to others is that there are no consequences. There are no agendas, there are no antagonists, and it's really just a search for the truth is how they paint this debate to be, and I feel like that's a very important thing in education, in society, and in the way that we can expand our knowledge and really enhance the way that we live.

Maddie:

Yeah. Especially, pulling from a lot of different backgrounds and hearing all those different voices, it was so much more productive in the sense that you're not so polar and you're hearing other people out. And many people I talked to after the debate said, "I changed my mind," and especially with snaps and pats and taps over your foot, I found myself snapping and tapping and whatnot to other people in the negative even though I was affirmative. I can agree with some of what another side is saying without leaving my complete ideas at the beginning. I can just add. I can see where other people are coming from. I can agree with what they're saying and I can show that in a not aggressive, "Oh, I'm leaving my side" kind of way. It's very much encourages the middle ground, which we don't often get to see.

Some people don't want to pick a side and you don't have to. That's really what this debate kind of showed me. Also showed me that you don't have to be scared to go up and do something. You can push out of your comfort zone and you can share how you feel and what you think and you're not going to be judged for it.

Sadie Webb:

After my conversation with Patrick and Maddie, I also interviewed first year students, Kat and Molly, who provided refreshing personal insights about their experience.

Molly:

My name is Molly Fite. I am a first year student at Juniata College. I'm currently exploratory, but I hope to study ceramics and early childhood education.

Kat:

I'm at Kat Smith. I'm also a first year student at Juniata. My major is chemistry with a minor in management.

Sadie Webb:

And so both of you are in Dean Damschroder and Dean James's course, and you both also attended the Braver Angels campus debate that we hosted last night. I would love to hear a little bit about what the classroom experience was like from your perspective and then what was the difference in the campus debate and what was that one?

Kat:

I felt like the one in class was a bit more structured. It was a bit more prepared, but overall I really enjoyed both of them. I think both were incredible. I really liked the campus-wide one where we were able to get opinions from outside of the classroom.

Molly:

Yeah, I agree. I felt like the overall classroom experience really prepared me well for the campus-wide debate. And I think that the Braver Angels Debates, we experienced both in the classroom and campus-wide, I feel like they were a really important experience for me personally because it was just a brand new way to explore ideas with your peers.

Sadie Webb:

So how did you guys explore ideas with your peers, right? It's really easy for us to say, "Oh, we want to engage with different ideas and explore ideas. What was that experience actually like?"

Molly:

The way that the debates are set up, it makes it very easy and approachable to explore ideas with your peers and open up and say whatever you're thinking and feeling. It's just a very approachable way to have a conversation and it takes the heat out of it.

Kat:

Yeah, I definitely agree. It was very mild, enjoyable environment that made it really easy to be able to actually listen to people instead of just stewing and being like, "My opinion is right. All these people are stupid." It was really easy to be able to be like, "Okay, your position makes sense. We're all talking in a very polite and calm manner."

Sadie Webb:

So neither of you were opening speakers for the campus debate, however, I heard after the fact you were both close to being opening speakers. And because I moderated the campus debate, I got to see you both engage and give really passionate speeches, ask some good questions.

What was your engagement like in the campus debate? What did it feel like to stand up in front of a room full of people and speak your mind on this topic? Yeah.

Kat:

I was definitely nervous when we were told that we were going to limit the rest of the speeches to just two minutes, it sort of threw me off. I had already had to sort of reform it what I was planning on speaking about because other people had already spoken about some of what I wanted to talk about, but for the two minutes it just threw me off and I ended up having a bit of a harder time speaking, but I'm still really glad I did.

I thought I really wanted to bring a different perspective that I know a lot of other people might not have considered.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. And so I actually want to touch on that. Kat, for our listeners. During last night's debate, we transitioned from the normal four-minute speeches to a lightning round because we saw that there were still quite a few students who wanted to share and engage, so we shortened the speaking times.

Kat, would you go into a little bit of detail about what you were sharing and what that was like?

Kat:

Yeah, I'm disabled, so I was talking about the way that AI can be used to support people with disabilities, things like text-to-speech, image analyzers, all that kind of stuff.

I felt I wasn't really able to convey my thoughts the best because it was a bit shorter, but I still feel like I was able to get enough of what I said or what I wanted to say.

Sadie Webb:

Have you had other opportunities to share personal aspects of your life like that before in the ways that they are connected to social or political issues?

Kat:

In the classroom, definitely, but never in front of that big of a crowd. It's something I definitely want to do again.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Was it impactful or enjoyable for you?

Kat:

Very much so. I like being able to open people's eyes up to experiences that they might not have to go through and make them see things just a little bit different and how these kinds of things are important for people.

Sadie Webb:

Molly, what about you? What was it like engaging for you and opening up and sharing in a pretty crowded room?

Molly:

It was definitely a little bit intimidating to begin with, but going into the debate, feeling prepared from what we had been working on in class was definitely helpful. But also seeing other individuals outside of our classroom also engaging and also having really important things to say in bringing up new points of discussion. I thought that was really impressive.

And honestly, that wasn't something I was expecting going into the debate, but I was really encouraged to see the amount of engagement that we had.

Sadie Webb:

If you could tell somebody about this experience, what would you highlight for them?

Molly:

I would definitely point out how a Braver Angels Debate is definitely a different type of discussion than what you're used to having every day, you're speaking to a moderator instead of directly to the speaker, which is, like I said earlier, definitely helps to cool things down a little bit and takes some of the bite out of things.

And it doesn't feel so personal. It feels like you're just having a conversation about the facts.

Kat:

Absolutely. I definitely agree. I would highly, highly recommend this to anybody else. It's such a good way to learn and engage with other people's thinking and to be able to get different perspectives.

Being able to engage on that level and connect with people on that level. It's not something I've really gotten to experience, especially with strangers, and it was very impactful.

Molly:

Yeah, I agree. I thought just getting to hear everyone's points of view and perspectives on the issue we were debating was really important, and it opened my eyes personally to things that I had personally never thought about before going into the debate room.

Sadie Webb:

So you two are both speaking a lot about the importance of engaging with new people and people you don't know and hearing their perspective, sharing your perspective, why is that so important in the higher education space?

Kat:

I feel right now we're sort of in a really politically contentious time. Everybody feels like they have to take a stance and they have to be very passionate and very educated, and it can be really exhausting, especially having so many passionate emotions and that kind of stuff. So being able to have that calmer environment was very important.

Molly:

Yeah, I think that the Braver Angels structure of the debate made for a really just accessible place to speak your mind. And hearing things coming from people that you ordinarily wouldn't have been

engaging with in the first place. It's just really important because it creates more of a sense of a community on campus, I think.

Sadie Webb:

And so then looking outside campus and thinking about the larger society and country that we live in, why is this important and why is it important to be doing this work on college campuses like yours?

Kat:

I think starting with college campuses helps prepare people, especially when they're going into the workforce, to be able to have these sort of more polite disagreements and that kind of stuff. Personally, I would love to see it in high schools and even middle schools, that kind of stuff.

Molly:

And looking more into the real world outside of education, I feel like discussions like these are really important to come to an understanding with each other.

I think a lot of the world right now, views, certain contentious, issues, it's very black and white, and I think there's a lot of space in between. There's a lot of shades of gray and multi-colors of different perspectives on things. And I think that we just need to explore that some more.

Kat:

I think especially in the era of the internet where everybody's sort of trapped in their bubble with people that they agree with, being able to see, being sort of forced to leave your comfort bubble and listen to other people is it's really important.

Sadie Webb:

Why do you think people get trapped in those bubbles? We often call them silos, and it's a very real thing and political polarization.

Molly:

I think there's a lot of safety and comfort within those silos and those groups of people with opinions. And there's a lot of unknown outside of that and exploring that can be scary and can make you, I don't know, I guess the black sheep. But I think it's really important to open yourself up to new ideas and perspectives.

Kat:

Yeah. It can be really hard to admit when you're wrong or when you don't know something. I see a lot on the internet now that it's like you have to have an opinion on something, and it's just like, I don't think you always do. I think it's better to be able to take this time to listen to other people and properly get the chance to develop your opinions. I feel like being able to do that shows a lot of emotional intelligence that I think we are sometimes lacking.

Society in general, I see it more so with older generations, but even younger ones, there's just a level of disconnect where you just sort of group the other opinion. You sort of think like, well, they're wrong, so they're bad.

Sadie Webb:

For the campus debate last night, we actually had some faculty members participate and even act as opening speakers. And so I'm curious as students, what was it like to have this open and honest conversation with people from a totally different generation than you?

Kat:

I was really excited to hear the teacher speaking, just being able to get that opinion because easy for students to talk to each other and form their own opinions, but being able to talk to that group that's sort of above us. That's sort of like the authority and being able to get on the same level and discuss with them we're all equals was, it was incredible.

Molly:

To kind of add on to that, I think with the structure of the debate, it made it a level playing field for everyone, and so having professors speak alongside of students was a really important thing, I guess, for promoting engagement.

Sadie Webb:

Do you think Juniata should do something like this again?

Kat:

Absolutely.

Molly:

Yeah, absolutely. I can definitely see myself coming to another debate like this one and hopefully participating more in the future.

Sadie Webb:

I have one more question for you guys, which is why is this work important to you as individuals?

Molly:

I come from a very small conservative town where different beliefs and ideas aren't really explored as much. And for me personally, I am someone who really appreciates learning and being exposed to new ideas. And I think conversations like this are really important to grow as individuals and gain understanding about others.

Kat:

Personally, I'm part of a lot of minority communities. I'm disabled and I'm part of the queer community, so my identity is constantly being debated in politics. But something that I've seen is that I feel like a lot of the people who are against people like me, it's a lot of fear and it's a lot of just, I'm going to listen to the people that I know that maybe they don't actually have people's best intention in mind.

So being able to share that experience and talk to people on that personal level in a space that's safe, I believe it'll help with a lot of the hatred and fear that is going on, especially in this country.

If you're able to go to a Braver Angels Debate, I'd highly, highly recommend it. It was an incredible experience. I enjoyed every moment of it.

Molly:

I second that.

Sadie Webb:

Looking back on these interviews as we're living in such a polarized time, it's inspiring to consider how students will carry these positive experiences forward as they become our country's next generation of leaders. But what is really inspiring is to see the ways which our program can make lasting institutional change on a campus. In addition to hosting multiple campus debates, Juniata College launched CD&D programming as part of its freshman orientation.

And with support from our national team, Derek James has become a moderator himself. Emphasizing yet another step that Juniata has taken toward becoming a strong sustainable community of civil discourse practice.

Speaker 8:

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