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# Claiming Debate's Value for Honors Student Learning

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**Abstract:** One reason that honors faculty often engage students in seminar discussions is to keep debate's features of competition, argument, and discord at bay. Intentionally structured academic debate represents a transdisciplinary pedagogy capable of cultivating ethical and empathetic citizenship through critical and creative thinking. The author uses such debate in a seminar curriculum to engage multiple sides of a single, complex sociopolitical issue with students of different disciplinary backgrounds, thereby fostering new understandings of beliefs: what is believed, why it is believed, and how one might live in accord with one's beliefs as an ethical citizen. Through research, writing, and oral discourse, the author asserts that intentional structuring moves academic debate beyond mere techniques for winning to help students achieve meaningful engagement with ideas. As such, it merits consideration as an experiential pedagogy to facilitate student learning in honors. A thorough review of relevant literature in honors is presented. Curricular overview and exercise templates are appended.

**Keywords:** academic debates & debating; teaching methods; argument-counter-argument integration; citizenship & ethics; University of Alabama (AL)—Honors College

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Debate as a vehicle for civil deliberation and student learning gets a bad rap. *Crossfire*-style shouting matches, intimidation tactics by politicians in televised performances leading up to elections, and limited-character Twitter arguments appear to represent the full potential of debate: argument and discord (Chomsky, 2002; Dimock, 2009). Thus, educators often shy away from debate out of concern that the pedagogy presents lopsided arguments

as equally valid and encourages students to understand dialogue about critical issues of public interest as a mere game to be won.

Moses (2019) frets that debate represents a moral quagmire because competing positions hold equal validity, elevating dangerous ideas for the sake of free speech. A related concern leads honors educators Hyde and Bingham (2000) to disparage debate because the structure fails to account for the harm done when competing ideological positions clash. Their experience of debate is one of significant polarization where students “embrace [their] position as the ‘right’ one and defend it unflinchingly” regardless of the validity of the adopted stance (p. 219). Such critiques lead Muir (1993) to fret that debate risks consciousness-raising without encouraging the critical thinking and empathetic disposition necessary for students to develop moral positions on complex sociopolitical issues.

In competitive debate tournaments, the focus on words per minute and rebuttal tactics—coaching strategies for gathering victories—suggests to the non-debater an abrasive approach to engagement that hampers efforts at civil discourse, yet time constraints that limit detailed analysis and truncate evidentiary support for complicated positions ensure the staying power of rapid-fire argumentation (Dimock, 2009). Ehninger (1958) worries, “Playing [debate] as a game deliberately fosters a habit of not facing up, of taking some of the most serious and pressing problems facing society, and simply playing at the solving of them as if they were party pastimes” (p. 135). The emphasis on techniques for winning rather than engagement with ideas means that “academic debate has long been charged with sophistry—the debater, defending both sides of a given issue, accused of hypocrisy and insincerity” (Muir, 1993, p. 277). Even Socrates worried over this danger, with Plato (1961) writing in the *Republic* that rhetoric risks “misuse . . . as a form of sport” with competitors “delight[ing] like puppies in pulling about and tearing with words all who approach them” (539b). The risk is that students who treat debate like a game no longer trust their moral compass. Considering the critiques of debate in concert allows an understanding of why opinions of it veer toward devious political efforts rather than its democratic origins.

## DEBATE AS HONORS PEDAGOGY

Despite these concerns, studies show that experience with academic debate leads to higher scores on critical thinking tests (Huseman et al., 1972), elevated GPAs (Mezuk et al., 2011), more consistent presence in class (Shackelford, 2019), increased preparedness to succeed in future coursework

(Anderson & Mezuk, 2012; Matlon & Keele, 1984), and access to future leadership positions (Freeley, 1986). Allen et al. (2009) find that while all forms of oral presentation strengthen students' critical reasoning skills, participation in academic debate leads to a 44% growth in critical thinking ability (see also Williams et al., 2001). Meanwhile, Dell (1958) observes that students who participate in academic debate express better preparation for voting and future civic engagement.

In addition, intentionally structured academic debate facilitates key elements of honors student learning, including transdisciplinary inquiry, critical and creative thinking, and ethical and empathetic citizenship. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) (n.d.) suggests that honors learning is engaged and experiential, curates creativity and inquiry, incites students to explore their assumptions, and promotes a questioning disposition toward critical sociopolitical issues. Practicing rhetoric, or the faculties of persuasion, in an honors course encourages structured conversations about issues of public importance and allows speakers to articulate and defend positions for what ought to be done in society. Thus, honors educators should claim intentionally structured academic debate as a transdisciplinary honors pedagogy that requires students to seek out and employ all the available means of persuasion, a process that develops critical and creative thinking. Within the context of honors seminars, intentionally structured academic debate further succeeds in curating ethical and empathetic citizenship.

To situate an argument for intentionally structured academic debate as an honors pedagogy, let us briefly explore the honors student and the honors learning experience. In her literature review of the way honors educators understand honors students, Achterberg (2005) suggests that honors students possess high ability and potential to succeed; in the classroom, they are "eager, exploratory, and experienced" (p. 77). Noting that the status of "honors student" has different meanings for different students on different campuses, she nevertheless suggests that honors students as a collective group benefit from intensive courses containing collaborative, experiential opportunities; this is because honors students "need to learn to work effectively in teams, make oral presentations to large groups of people, initiate contact with people of different status, age, and cultures, and be comfortable in a variety of contexts" (Achterberg, 2005, p. 80). These types of experiences in the classroom help counter students' tendency to see the faculty member as the expert for whom students must produce a right answer (e.g., Edman, 2002). While opportunities for debate may also be of use to non-honors students, the pedagogical goals of honors education—including transdisciplinary learning,

critical and creative thinking, and ethical and empathetic citizenship—make intentionally structured academic debate a powerful vehicle for honors student learning. Akin to service learning and study abroad, honors educators should claim intentionally structured academic debate as a foundational pedagogical tool for honors curricula.

Honors classes engage students in debates about complicated ethical issues, but they often do so in informal ways (e.g., Basu, 2017; Hester & Besing, 2017; Robertson & Rane-Szostak, 2001). Faculty report the value of these discussions and assignments (e.g., Achterberg, 2005; Huelin, 2003). For example, Nickolai (2005) finds that when faculty challenge students to write persuasive speeches, the students do so attentive to “rational appeal, emotional appeal, and ethical appeal” (p. 49). The combination of the three encourages students to practice the forms of rhetoric—*ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotion), and *logos* (logical reasoning)—while learning how to write for an audience other than their professor. In another example, Baxter Magolda (1992) notes that many honors students seek out opportunities to debate their instructors and peers, learning from the personal comradery that comes with debate more than from lecture courses. Robertson and Rane-Szostak (2001) even report their students requesting more class time dedicated to debate opportunities. They note that students pinpoint debate as the classroom experience that best facilitates their learning. When done well, debate warrants consideration as a pedagogical tactic for honors education.

## Moral Forum

To demonstrate the pedagogical value of debate in honors, I offer the example of the honors seminar Moral Forum at the University of Alabama, which uses intentionally structured academic debate as an experiential pedagogy. Moral Forum introduces honors students to ethical discourse and civil deliberation via the analysis of a debate resolution addressing a single, complex sociopolitical issue. Students study the issue through the lenses of multiple ethical traditions. As students become familiar with the issue, they write affirmative and negative position statements responding to the debate resolution via one ethical tradition. Students next pair into teams of two to continue their research and revise their theory-based position statements. Student teams then participate in the Moral Forum Tournament, where they use ethical theories to advocate for and against the resolution. Volunteer judges evaluate students’ success in the debate rounds based on persuasiveness, moral reasoning, and use of empathetic dialogue.

Moral Forum teaches students that difficult ethical questions do not have a right answer. Instead of searching for a correct answer, students must use all of the faculties available to them to discern why they believe what they believe, how to engage difficult questions in a logically consistent way, and where they might find value, collaboration, and empathy with others who think differently than they do. While Moral Forum represents just one form of intentionally structured academic debate, the course offers a good example to interested honors educators about the possibilities of debate for their classes. The Appendix offers a more detailed explanation of the Moral Forum course and debate tournament.

## **Transdisciplinary Learning**

As the example of Moral Forum demonstrates, intentionally structured academic debate deserves a place in honors curricula because it engages students in reasoning, citizenship, and teamwork while exceeding the bounds of academic disciplines. The pedagogy undermines the norm of understanding problems within the confines of an academic discipline and instead encourages honors students to see knowledge as interconnected (Muir, 1993). Transdisciplinarity borrows from multiple ways of encountering and responding to complex issues, prompting students to consider themselves members of a community of scholars who depend upon and learn with each other (University of Alabama Honors College, 2020). The learning that occurs via intentionally structured debate is necessarily broader than that of a disciplinary course (NCHC, 2013) as debate draws upon multiple disciplines in order to introduce students to varied ways of conceptualizing and addressing complex problems.

Both engineering and English majors may find points of interest in ethical analysis of the debate topic since the topic benefits from multiple lines of inquiry and ways of confronting problems. The inclusion of students from different disciplinary backgrounds—as is typical of honors seminars (NCHC, 2013)—means that the questions asked about the debate topic are more robust than would be possible if all students were trained to confront difficult problems in the same way (e.g., Cargas, 2016; Wintrol & Jerinic, 2013). The pedagogy encourages students to draw from their disciplinary knowledge bases but also to reckon with other ways of knowing and being, including philosophy, communication studies, and the many disciplinary fields that the debate topic concerns. A debate on the morality of plea bargaining, for example, required students to familiarize themselves with criminal justice, gender

and race studies, sociology, law, history, political science, and social work, among other fields. Thus, intentionally structured academic debate asks students to engage subject matter in a transdisciplinary conversation, where they must interrogate the bounds of their conceptions in order to advance. The effectiveness of this pedagogical tactic for honors student learning is inherent in the primary learning outcomes of academic debate: critical and creative thinking and ethical and empathetic citizenship.

## Critical and Creative Thinking

The NCHC Board of Directors (2013) argues that critical thinking and creative ways of understanding problems are signature honors student learning outcomes. While Cargas (2016) notes that critical thinking as an honors student learning outcome remains underexplored, she suggests that teaching the habit “is especially important in interdisciplinary honors programs” and courses that deal with “controversial issues” (p. 125). Thus, let us first define critical and creative thinking to then understand the ways that intentionally structured academic debate makes possible such learning.

Paul and Elder (2006) assert that “critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it” (p. 4). Creative thinking, meanwhile, amounts to a habit of looking outside the norm and persisting in investigation (Weston, 2006). Paul (1993) argues that critical thinking cannot separate from creative thinking; the two exist as tandem components of the fit mind. However, both demand practice. Thus, Paul (1993) argues that we must learn how to analyze and evaluate our thinking as well as expand the possibilities for how we think.

Honors education relies heavily on seminar discussions wherein students work through difficult problems and perform textual analysis (e.g., Achterberg, 2005; Hester & Besing, 2017; Taylor, 2002). While the seminar format is a powerful pedagogical strategy, Cargas (2016) notes that even in honors classes, students defer to experts and texts rather than forming their own opinions and “are not yet open to the possibility of valid counterarguments” (p. 124). Employing intentionally structured academic debate alongside seminar discussion elevates the possibility of student learning beyond what either pedagogy could achieve on its own.

Kruglanski and Webster (1996) note that human beings form decisions based on a habit of cognitive seizing and freezing, where “closure [is sought] as soon as possible” and “maintain[ed] . . . as long as possible” (p. 263). Intentionally structured academic debate trains students to refuse this stance

because it requires students to reckon with competing interpretations of a problem. Students engage in an active process of meaning making because they cannot rely on their experiences or preconceptions to develop an argument. Instead, students must present an equally strong argument for the side they disagree with (Greene & Hicks, 2005). Thus, students learn to seek out research and expertise that they evaluate before drawing conclusions about complex issues.

The research process must be continuous to stay on top of the fast-changing landscape of the debate topic. One memorable final debate round, in which students debated the morality of the United States government employing drone strikes on foreign soil, demonstrates the crucial nature of this habit. Throughout the tournament, debates often centered on the harm done when civilians die during drone strikes. Harrowing examples of women and children killed and medical professionals caught in the crossfire when responding to strikes proved persuasive for negative teams. On the morning of the final debate round, though, a humanitarian watchdog organization reported that United States drone strikes resulted in no civilian deaths during the preceding ten-month period. The team arguing for the continued use of drone strikes read this report, but their opponents did not. Because the affirmative team developed a habit of constant questioning and research, they uncovered the evidence necessary to dismantle a significant argument against their position, allowing them to carry the round.

Thus, unlike an essay or examination, in which students make their arguments once, intentionally structured academic debate demands a longitudinal commitment wherein students write and rewrite arguments on multiple sides of a complex, pressing issue (Cargas, 2016; Woodard, 2019). Rewriting position statements as a team requires students to account for logical or evidentiary gaps in their previous iterations as well as feedback provided by the instructor, peers, and judges—a process that improves the level of the analysis and the power of the argument made. Successful teams continue to rewrite their position statements after every debate round in order to better position themselves for the subsequent round.

Another way that intentionally structured academic debate enhances student learning of critical and creative thinking is the requirement for oral defense (Rusk & Razzak, 2019). Paul (1993) notes, “Reasoning is a sequence of inferences that begin somewhere and take us somewhere else. Thus, all reasoning comes to an end, yet could have been taken further” (p. 37). Anecdotally, I observe students in Moral Forum appear satisfied with their reasoning

until they engage in a practice debate round. Students often expect that their preconceived arguments will fill the time allotted for speeches, and they express confidence in their planned rebuttals to counter the anticipated logic and examples of their opponents. However, they soon find their preparation on both counts lacking. Upon attempting to defend their position orally, they realize the limitations of their understanding of both the complexity of the issue and the evidence needed to support their arguments. In preparation for the judged debate rounds, students return to theory and research to shore up their logic. Thus, intentionally structured academic debate requires students to continue honing their critical and creative thinking skills while reckoning with ethical theories and their understanding of what ought to be done in society.

### **Ethical and Empathetic Citizenship**

In addition to facilitating critical and creative thinking, intentionally structured academic debate produces ethical and empathetic citizens. The University of Alabama Honors College (2020) defines ethical and empathetic citizens as scholars “who evaluate solutions to complex social or professional issues integrating perspectives and beliefs of others that one does not necessarily share” (para. 4). Honors education cultivates “local and global” citizens who “tolerat[e] ambiguity” and difference (NCHC Board of Directors, 2013). Students come to see themselves as citizens of a collaborative learning community because of the focus on engaged, experiential pedagogies and the attention given to the whole student.

One value of intentionally structured academic debate is the opportunity for students to discern why they believe what they believe (Robertson & Rane-Szostak, 2001). Thus, students in Moral Forum learn and then steep their positions in the ethical theories of utilitarianism, deontology, natural law, Rawlsian justice as fairness, ethics of care, and Foucauldian critical theory (see Appendix for more explanation). For almost all the students in the course, these ways of understanding what ought to be done are wholly unfamiliar. Students may think with some of the ideas contained in the theories, but they enter the honors seminar unfamiliar with the language or logic of them. Huelin (2003) argues, “Whether this alienation is historical, traditional, conceptual, or rhetorical in origin, it says to our students, ‘Yours is not the only way of seeing the world’” (p. 22). Introducing students not just to the subject matter of the debate topic but also to the ethical theories as a way of concentrating their logical analysis encourages critical thinking about what it means to be an ethical citizen.

Intentionally structured academic debate produces “student-debater-citizen[s]” who focus on and value people even as they argue against ideas (Greene & Hicks, 2005, p. 117). Huelin (2003) notes that the honors seminar experience encourages students to engage unfamiliar “people, texts, [and] arguments” in a respectful fashion. The honors seminar is uniquely positioned to counter the typical concerns about debate because students know their peers whom they engage in complicated discussions (e.g., Hester & Besing, 2017). Students are more open to new ideas when those ideas are presented by peers they know and respect.

Further, just as oral argumentation elevates the possibility for critical and creative thinking, Greene and Hicks (2005) argue that the oral performance requirement of debate is the keystone that produces habits of empathy and advocacy in students. The requirement to speak the positions into being causes students to learn and value arguments they disagree with personally, for “empathy is best learned face-to-face, where our obligations to each other and to our common work, the search for truth, are more difficult to ignore” (Huelin, 2003, p. 25). The pedagogical format of intentionally structured academic debate constrains students’ encounters with their peers as does the emphasis on civility and the requirement that students articulate and defend their opponents’ best point (see Appendix for more explanation). This combination helps ensure that students engage in debate, not with a focus on winning but as a way of conversing about difficult topics with peers.

For example, I once observed a debate round about the morality of an organ market where one team confidently delivered a utilitarian case filled with facts and evidence about the benefits of applying capitalist principles to the distribution of needed organs. They remained unaware until their opponent began speaking in the rebuttal that her father languished on the transplant waiting list. Her emotional response to their cost-benefit analysis proved incredibly effective in forcing the utilitarian team to reckon with the human beings at the heart of the debate, an experience that led them to begin reconceptualizing their values and assumptions about what ought to be done in society. Looking their peer in the eye and arguing against her made possible a reckoning with their values and ethics. The competitors continued their conversations afterward and went on to partner in advocacy efforts, demonstrating how a focus on ethics and empathy helps students develop community.

## CONCLUSION

Critical and creative thinking and ethical and empathetic citizenship amount to the primary student learning outcomes that transdisciplinary academic debate facilitates for honors students when intentionally structured, yet these are certainly not the only learning outcomes of intentionally structured academic debate in an honors seminar. Because students work with partners, confront new ideas, and perform free speech, debate also inculcates dispositions toward collaboration and inclusion. Robertson and Rane-Szostak (2001) highlight one student's reflection on the opportunity to engage in group debate: "Working in groups [is] the best way of helping increase thinking and disposition skills because you [are] in a diverse group of thinkers and [have] to provide support for your views" (p. 46). This feedback suggests that the opportunity to collaborate with peers encourages honors students to further hone critical thinking and empathy. Learning difficult problems via collaborative teamwork represents another strength of the honors experience, which warrants future scholarship.

Similarly, the habits of active listening and respect for diversity that intentionally structured academic debate demands merit investigation as honors colleges and programs work to diversify their student bodies. Because debate requires students to seek out and defend views they do not necessarily share, students must explore powerful arguments to which they might not otherwise gain exposure as undergraduates. Students who might never entertain critical theory, for instance, must reckon with its merits and understand its logic, encouraging a diversity of ideas and giving credence to the ideologies of those students who find themselves on the margins of their classrooms. This reckoning is in keeping with Woodard's (2019) assertion that critical thinking geared toward the development of ethical citizens should elevate diversity and inclusion in honors student learning outcomes.

Thus, intentionally structured academic debate deserves a central place in honors curricula. The context of honors seminars and a commitment to intentionally structuring academic debate mitigate concerns about the pedagogy's risks. The pitfalls of debate presented by Chomsky (2002), Dimock (2009), Ehninger (1958), Hyde and Bineham (2000), and Moses (2019) are all valid concerns students should reckon with as they learn to debate. However, these critiques fail to give honors students and honors curricula enough credit. A transdisciplinary pedagogy capable of cultivating critical and creative thinking while developing students' ethical and empathetic dispositions warrants a home in honors curricula and further analysis by honors educators.

Honors classes effectively equip students for the challenge of orienting themselves when they encounter multiple valid positions within complex social and political issues. Training in seminar discussions primes honors students to engage complicated ideas with their peers. The learning made possible via intentionally structured academic debate extends the power of the seminar experience. The requirement to research, write, rewrite, and orally defend complex positions on multiple sides of difficult sociopolitical issues prompts students to reckon with their assumptions, push the boundaries of their thinking, and develop the empathy requisite for ethical citizenship. For these reasons, I urge my fellow honors educators to claim debate as far more than argument and discord, recognizing that intentionally structured academic debate demands consideration as a valuable, transdisciplinary pedagogy for honors student learning.

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## APPENDIX

### Overview of the Moral Forum Course and Tournament

Moral Forum engages students in an example of intentionally structured academic debate for the purpose of curating honors student learning outcomes, including transdisciplinarity, critical and creative thinking, and ethical and empathetic citizenship. An overview of the Moral Forum course and tournament may be of interest to honors educators interested in the pedagogy. Thus, this appendix addresses the unique features of the Moral Forum course and tournament, which honors educators might adopt wherever useful to their own classes.

To begin, the choice of debate topic that students investigate throughout the semester is critical to the success of Moral Forum. Intentional selection of the topic ensures varied, balanced arguments from multiple ethical perspectives. Topics taught in recent years include the morality of organ markets, plea bargaining, drone strikes, the death penalty, the individual mandate for health insurance coverage, the Internet of Things, and universal DNA databases. The phrasing of the debate topic requires students to use reason and evidence to make a moral argument. For example, the topic of plea bargaining reads as, “Resolved: In order to be a more moral society, the United States government should continue permitting plea bargaining in criminal cases.” No matter the topic, the phrasing, “Resolved: In order to be a more moral society . . .” remains the central vector by which students engage the subject matter.

To reckon with the complexity of the debate topic, students explore scholarly articles, investigative journalism, think tank policy briefs, and governmental reports. Students read widely on the topic, with an expectation that they read beyond sources offered in the formal curriculum. Importantly, though, Moral Forum teaches students about the debate topic because it makes possible exploration of competing ethical traditions for evaluating what ought to be done in society. Thus, in forming their cases for and against the resolution, students read and discuss primary sources from different ethical traditions. Seminar discussions cement understanding of the varied positions on the topic and the application of ethical theories.

The format of the Moral Forum tournament also helps ensure robust student learning. For example, students dress in business attire and engage in debate rounds in our campus law school's moot court rooms. These practices ensure that students understand the debates as distinct from the informal conversations about the issue which occur in seminar discussions. Additionally, all students participate in a minimum of two debate rounds. This requirement forces students to prepare for and reckon with both sides of the debate rather than repeating arguments for their preferred side.

To ensure fair and balanced arguments, all students participating in the debate rounds speak for the same amount of time. Speakers 1 and 3 comprise the affirmative team while Speakers 2 and 4 represent the negative position. The debate includes the following components: Constructive arguments, cross examination, rebuttals, and summary foci. Each team has two minutes to use for preparation at any interval desired between speeches. Debaters may bring

printed notes with them for reference during the debate. Figure 1 presents the flow of each speaking component.

**Figure 1. Judges’ Ballot for a Moral Forum Tournament Round**

<b>UH155: Moral Forum 2020 Tournament Ballot</b>	
Resolution: In order to be a more moral society, the U.S. government should expand the FBI's CODIS database system to establish a universal DNA database.  Please use this sheet to follow the flow of the debate and record comments during each phase. Make as many or as few notes as you deem necessary.	
Affirmative—Speaker 1: _____ Speaker 3: _____ Negative—Speaker 2: _____ Speaker 4: _____	
<b>Constructive Argument (Speaker 1)—4 Minutes</b>	<b>Constructive Argument (Speaker 2)—4 Minutes</b>
<b>Cross-Examination 1 (Speaker 1 asks the first question)—3 Minutes</b>	
<b>Rebuttal (Speaker 3)—1 Minute Restate, 4 Minute Rebuttal</b>	<b>Rebuttal (Speaker 4)—1 Minute Restate, 4 Minute Rebuttal</b>
<b>Cross-Examination 2 (Speaker 4 asks the first question)—4 Minutes</b>	
<b>Summary Focus (Speaker 1)—2 Minutes</b>	<b>Summary Focus (Speaker 2)—2 Minutes</b>

**Constructive Arguments—Speaker 1 (Affirmative) and Speaker 2 (Negative)**

Speakers present a four-minute logical argument using evidentiary support to affirm (Speaker 1) and negate (Speaker 2) the debate resolution. Constructive arguments introduce the team's position, define terms, explain the ethical theory by which the team will evaluate the morality of the issue, and analyze the issue.

**First Cross-Examination Round—Speaker 1 (Affirmative) and 2 (Negative)**

During the cross-examination rounds, speakers engage in a discussion that should be conversational, rather than argumentative, in nature. Judges penalize students for abrasiveness, personal attacks, and attempts to filibuster opponents. Speaker 1 asks the first question, but after that question and answer, a conversation emerges. The first cross-examination round clarifies arguments and exposes points of contention. Speakers strive to ask probing questions that maintain civility while noting opponents' weaknesses.

**Rebuttals—Speaker 3 (Affirmative) and Speaker 4 (Negative)**

The rebuttal round begins with speakers identifying and presenting the opposition's best point. Rebuttal speakers attempt to restate their opponent's most persuasive point more memorably than their opponent first stated it. Speakers cannot rebut their opponent's best point; instead, this point stands unchallenged. Speakers 3 and 4 then extemporaneously analyze the remainder of their opponents' position and expose gaps in their opponents' reasoning. Rebuttal speakers also reiterate their own team's position.

**Second Cross-Examination Round—Speaker 3 (Affirmative) and 4 (Negative)**

Speakers 3 and 4 engage in a civil discussion during the second cross examination round. Speaker 4 asks the first question, which Speaker 3 answers. After that, speakers converse with no required order for question and response. Once again, the discussion should be cordial, as the intent is to examine ideas and logic rather than attack the opposing team. The second cross-examination advances the debate by finding areas of agreement and noting areas of contention.

**Summary Focus—Speaker 1 (Affirmative) and Speaker 2 (Negative)**

The conclusion of the debate requires Speakers 1 and 2 to crystallize their team's main arguments. Speakers consolidate their positions by defending their most important points and refuting their opponents' case.

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Three volunteers judge each debate round, with volunteers drawn from graduate students in law, philosophy, communication studies, and education, upperclassmen honors students, Moral Forum alumni, faculty, staff, and local community members. Judges undergo a training before the debates begin to ensure fair and consistent evaluation across debate rounds. However, judges need no prior expertise with debate or the debate topic given that the purpose of the exercise is for students to engage in civil conversations about an issue of importance to the community at large. Judges use the ballot in Figure 1 to annotate arguments and evaluate speakers' persuasiveness and logic. Judges listen for effective reasoning and rebuttal, logical analysis, organized presentation of evidentiary support, and civil communication. A judge's

preference for a particular ethical theory or side of the debate should not enter into the decision; rather, judges must remain objective. Judges provide students with constructive feedback on their successes and weaknesses in the round before letting the teams know which position carried the round. After the first round of debate, students have a fifteen-minute break before their team engages in a debate on the opposite side. When teams switch sides for their second debate, they debate a different opposing team before a new group of judges.

After the opening rounds, in which teams debate both sides, the top sixteen teams progress to a single elimination bracket. Eliminated students serve as judges. While students debate just once per round after the opening round, teams must continue to prepare for both sides of the debate. A coin toss immediately before the round begins determines the side that each team argues. The final round, wherein the top two teams compete, takes place before a public audience, with guest judges who are topical and/or public speaking experts. An award ceremony follows the final debate, with students receiving awards for best individual debater, best written case, excellence in civility, semifinalists, finalists, and champions. Local and campus media regularly cover this event.