



**COLLEGE DEBATE AND DISCOURSE PROGRAM AT
VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE**

supported by Braver Angels, ACTA, BRIDGE USA and a grant from the John Templeton Foundation

SCHEV Virtual Event

March 29, 2024

Valentina Dimitrova-Grajzl, Department of Economics and Business

Sara Whipple, Department of Psychology

Kim Connolly, Center for Leadership and Ethics

The evolution of the program

David Blankenhorn, founder of Braver Angels, invited by VMI's Center for Leadership and Ethics (CLE) to speak at VMI in 2017. The CLE hosted four concurrent Braver Angels debates in the Leadership conference in 2021.

Collaboration between VMI's Building BRIDGEs Club and CLE (starting in 2021); invitation to be a community of practice for the Templeton Project in Fall 2022.

Since then, 7 Post-wide debates (two of which intercollegiate), lunch debates, introductory training about Braver Angels debates.

College Debates and Discourse Alliance



Braver Angels provides a proven debate methodology, programs, and workshops that teach students to engage with empathy and civility.



ACTA brings myriad connections to college leadership and faculty, as well as project management and media expertise.



BridgeUSA has a wide network of chapters on college campuses, led by students dedicated to civic engagement.

<https://www.goacta.org/initiatives/college-debates/>

- **Our goals**

- Create a brave space for meaningful and genuine conversations on important and sometimes challenging topics
- Enhance our students' listening skills
 - Good leaders are also good listeners
- Teach our students to have empathy toward others
- Teach students to express their views and frame convincing arguments
- Demonstrate civil discourse techniques



Brave Spaces

Arao, B. & Clemens, K.L. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In Landreman, L. (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Stories and reflections from social justice educators* (pp. 135-150). Sterling, VA: Stylus

“It became increasingly clear to us that our approach to initiate social justice dialogue should not be to convince participants that we can remove risk from the equation, for this is simply impossible. Rather, we propose revisiting our language, shifting away from the concept of safety and emphasizing the importance of bravery instead, to help students understand – and to rise to – the challenges of genuine dialogue.”

How to Form Debate Resolutions?

- Two requirements:
 - Interesting to the intended audience
 - Relatively equal split in opinions
 - We distribute a Qualtrics survey to all students to gauge both interest and split.
 - In the survey, we propose 3-5 topics and also leave room for suggestions



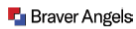
DOES A COMMITMENT TO CIVILITY TAKE CARE OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ISSUES?

A Braver Angels debate open to the VMI community – cadets, faculty, staff and alumni

When: September 25, 2023 from 1900 to 2100
Where: Hall of Valor, CLE

For more information, contact:
COL Dimitrova-Grajzl / Dimitrova-grajzlvpmi.edu

To register, use the QR code on this flyer



DOES THE CORPS TRULY LEAD THE CORPS?

A Braver Angels Debate sponsored by the VMI Building BRIDGES Club, in collaboration with the Center for Leadership and Ethics

When: February 28, 2024
7-9pm

Where: Hall of Valor, CLE



To register, use the QR code on this flyer
For further info, contact
COL Dimitrova-Grajzl: Dimitrova-grajzlvpmi.edu
Cadet Devin Thomas: thomassd24@vmi.edu



IS SOCIAL MEDIA A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

A Braver Angels college debate, sponsored by the VMI Building BRIDGES Club in collaboration with the VMI Center for Leadership and Ethics
Students, faculty and staff are welcome to join this Braver Angels debate.



When: Wednesday, September 28 – 6:00 – 9:00 pm
Where: Hall of Valor, CLE – dinner will be provided



To sign up for the debate, use the QR code or this registration link:
https://vmi.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bK62MovD21G7YA6

For info, contact:
Col Dimitrova-Grajzl - dimitrova-grajzlvpmi.edu
LTC Whipple - whippless@vmi.edu



SHOULD AMERICANS RECEIVE UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME?

A Braver Angels Intercollegiate Debate hosted by Southern Virginia University and open to students, faculty and staff at SVU, VMI, WLU and Mountain Gateway Community College

When: February 22, 7-9pm

Where: Ballroom, Main Hall, Southern Virginia University

STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE DEBATE AND THE RESEARCH SURVEYS CAN EARN UP TO \$25



Dessert will be served.
To register, use the QR code on this flyer
For further info, contact
Professor Armstrong: john.armstrong@svu.edu



THE ATHLETE/NON-ATHLETE DIVIDE AT VMI

A Braver Angels Debate – by Cadets, for Cadets
Sponsored by the Building BRIDGES Club in collaboration with the VMI Center for Leadership and Ethics



When: Thursday, March 2 – 1930 to 2100
Where: CLE, Hall of Valor

Make your own smores bar!



To register, use the QR code on this flyer.
https://vmi.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_IRZPNM8EvVOZ4hM

For info, contact:
COL Dimitrova-Grajzl - Dimitrova-grajzlvpmi.edu
Katie Lloyd - lloydke23@mail.vmi.edu
Devin Thomas - thomassd24@mail.vmi.edu



SHOULD K-12 SCHOOLS BAN CONTROVERSIAL BOOKS?

A Braver Angels Intercollegiate Debate

SPONSORED BY THE VMI BUILDING BRIDGES CLUB, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS

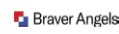
Hosted at VMI and open to students, faculty, and staff at Washington and Lee University, Mountain Gateway Community College, and Southern Virginia University

When: November 28 – 7:00-9:00 PM
Where: Hall of Valor, Marshall Hall, VMI

Dessert will be provided

For more information, contact:
COL Dimitrova-Grajzl: Dimitrova-grajzlvpmi.edu
Cadet Devin Thomas: thomassd24@vmi.edu

To register:
use the QR code on this flyer



SHOULD WOMEN BE ASSIGNED COMBAT ROLES?

A Braver Angels college debate, sponsored by the VMI Building BRIDGES Club in collaboration with the VMI Center for Leadership and Ethics



When: Monday, February 28 / 7:00 - 9:00 PM
Where: Hall of Valor, CLE – Dinner will be provided



To sign up for the debate, use the QR code on this flyer. Deadline to register: February 21.

For info, contact:
COL Dimitrova-Grajzl - dimitrova-grajzlvpmi.edu
LTC Whipple - whippless@vmi.edu



List of Topics from Recent Collegiate Debates

- Should colleges disallow controversial speech that could be construed as hate speech?
- Without access to abortion, can women achieve equality with men?
- Is healthcare a human right?
- Should the U.S. implement more restrictive gun laws to reduce crime?
- Should monuments that are perceived as symbols of racism, such as Confederate statues, be removed from public view?
- Should the U.S. build the southern border wall?
- Should transgender athletes compete in women's sports?
- Does AI provide more benefit than harm to humanity?

For more topics, check the Debates and Discourse Alliance website (<https://www.goacta.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/College-debate-topics.pdf>) or the Braver Angels website (<https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/debates/>)

Structure of Braver Angels Debates

Parliamentary Style

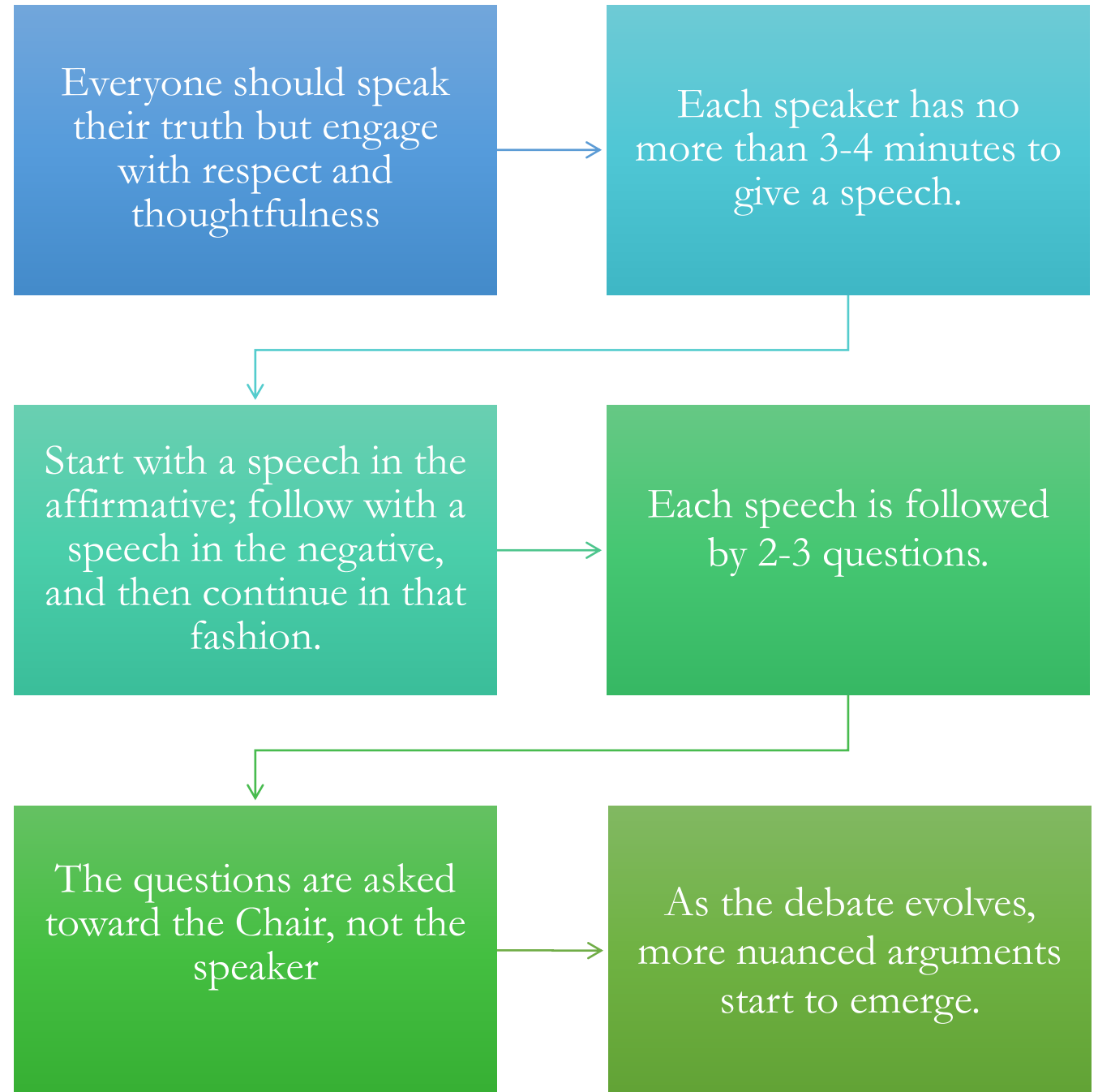
Chair of debate

- Trained by the College Debates and Discourse Alliance
- Sets the expectations for the event
- Explains the ground rules in advance
- Guides the discussion by enforcing the rules

Everyone in the room is a participant:

- Everyone can request to give a speech
- Everyone can raise their hand and ask a question of a speaker
- Everyone is engaged in active listening
- All discussion is directed to debate chair.

Ground Rules



Building a community of practice:

- Three faculty/staff fellows
- Four student fellows
- Training
- Lunch debates
- Classroom debates



Classroom Debates

- Decide on resolution that is reflective of course content - e.g.,
 - “Government intervention in the economy does more harm than good.”
 - “Government should regulate the price of life-saving drugs.”
- Ask students to do research and prepare arguments for and against the resolution.
 - Evidence, data, examples
 - Focus on credible sources
 - Lived experiences
- Make clear to students that participation in the debate is expected (either as a speaker or a questioner).
- Ask 2 or 4 students to be opening speakers and have a brief conversation with the students ahead of the debate.
- Faculty member facilitates the debate and reserves the right to clarify or correct students during the debate.

You can request the Curricular Toolkit that the College Debates and Discourse Program has put together – <https://www.goacta.org/curricular-toolkit/>

Assessing Effectiveness: Research

Grant Overview

- In 2022 College Debates & Discourse Alliance awarded 2-year John Templeton Foundation Grant to study effect of debates
- 10 participating schools
 - VMI
 - Arizona State University
 - University of Baltimore
 - Biola University
 - University of Delaware
 - Denison University
 - University of Denver
 - Duke University
 - Linn-Benton Community College
 - Texas A&M

Research Design

- Pre/post surveys of debate participants with gift card incentives
- Variables assessed: campus climate, political participation, intellectual humility, perspective taking; self-efficacy, self concept, social trust, etc.

Timeline

- Data collected: Spring 2023, Fall 2023 & Spring 2024
- Data to be analyzed by Fall 2024

“This type of debate opens them up to the possibility that people who disagree with them are not adversaries, they’re just interesting human beings who have a different point of view.”

Doug Sprei, ACTA’s VP of Campus Partnerships and Director of the College Debates and Discourse Alliance

THANK YOU!

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or if you are interested in organizing an intercollegiate debate with VMI.

Our email addresses are:

dimitrova-grajzlv@vmi.edu

whippless@vmi.edu

connollykv@vmi.edu

Rules of Engagement in Today's Debate

Please respect the privacy of all participants in today's debate:

- no recording
- no screenshots of the zoom room

You are welcome to continue the discussion beyond today's debate but please do not identify participants' names and affiliations in any subsequent conversations.