

What Washington could learn from the high school ethics bowl in Utah

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SALT LAKE CITY — Other than the coin toss, there was no similarity between this bowl and the one that took place recently in Atlanta.

The participants dressed nicely, as if going to a job interview, and their goal was not so much to defeat their opponents as to convince them. Nobody went to Disney World afterward or went home with a fancy ring. It was Utah's regional high school Ethics Bowl, an event that champions moral understanding and civility while challenging teens to work through complex moral issues.

Teams of up to five students presented arguments on how to best resolve ethical dilemmas, such as whether it's OK for public colleges to accept private money, whether China's social-credit system is just, and whether it's ever OK to read another person's diary without their permission.



Spenser Heaps, Deseret News

Aubrey Hansen, 18, Liz Romrell, 17, Solveig Christianson, 18, Chantal Ouahib, 17, and Marley Campbell, 17, of Timpanogos High School, consults with each other while competing in the Utah High School Ethics Bowl at Westminster College in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Feb. 2, 2019.

Then they listened to their opponents' reasoning, and adjusted or bolstered their own positions — all without the animosity and posturing seen so often in the political arena. It was, observers said, a great lesson for Congress.

Utah's bowl, held Feb. 2 at Westminster College, is part of a growing movement to help teens learn how to think critically about morals and ethics in a forum that more resembles a polite conversation than a debate.

“In debate, the goal, as Aristotle says, is to try any available means of persuasion and to win an argument drawing on all available means. In Ethics Bowl, there really is a genuine commitment to getting closer to truth,” said Luana Uluave, an English teacher at Waterford School who coached the Ethics Bowl team there for four years.

Spenser Heaps, Deseret News

Samantha Dorjmenchim, 15, Liam Robinson, 16, Keb Payne, 15, Hayden Wallin, 16, and Marilla Burke, 16, of Utah County Academy of Sciences, talk between rounds of the Utah High School Ethics Bowl at Westminster College in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Feb. 2, 2019.

Modeled after ethics bowls held by colleges across the U.S., the high school bowls seek to engage even younger students to work out solutions to ethical quandaries that perplex many adults. Though numbers are modest — just four high schools competed in Utah's debate — Uluave said she believes that more students would take part if given the opportunity.

“My experience in a long career of teaching high school is that 100 percent of high-school students want to sit around and talk about moral issues and be heard,” she said.

“They are so frequently commanded, punished, ordered, instructed. But no one listens to them. And my experience is, they care really deeply about building lives with meaning and purpose.”

Across the nation, about 4,500 teens are competing in regional bowls like Utah's, hoping to win a slot among the 24 teams that will go to the national finals in April. Their conversations on “timely and timeless issues” could be a model for the rest of the country, with the bowls' focus on open-mindedness, thoughtfulness and rigor, said Dominique Dery, director of the National High School Ethics Bowl.

While they're at it, the students might also come up with some solutions to ethical dilemmas of national import, such bringing long-dead species back from extinction or new ways of distributing human organs for transplantation.

Respect for opponents

At the Utah contest, held the day before the NFL's Super Bowl, teams from Park City High School, Waterford School, Timpanogos High School and Utah County Academy of Sciences competed in rounds that began at 9 a.m. and lasted until 3.

A team of juniors from Utah County Academy of Sciences, a charter school in Orem, won and will advance to the semifinals, still to be scheduled, that will determine who goes to the national finals in April at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The students on the winning team are Ashley Black, Hannah Cutler, Brandon Jones, Carter Morrison, Valerie Rubio and Andrew Schlachter.

With its win, the UCAS team, coached by Julie Paz, steps into in a long line of Utah successes in ethics competitions. Utah schools had ethics bowl competitions even before the national program existed, Dery said. Park City High School, coached by Matt Nagel, has competed in nationals twice, and Waterford School, a private school in Sandy, was the national champion in 2015.

The captain of the championship Waterford team, Eliza Wells, is now a senior at Stanford University and said participation in ethics bowls set the trajectory for her career. She decided to major in philosophy because of the experience and intends to pursue a doctorate after graduation in June. She also founded an Ethics Bowl team and club at Stanford.

The organized high school competitions have only existed for seven years and compete with high school debates, which are longer established and popular in part because of their laser-sharp exchanges between competitors. But for Wells, the more civil tone is what makes Ethics Bowls so appealing.



Spenser Heaps, Deseret News

A team from Park City and one from Timpanogos compete in the Utah High School Ethics Bowl at Westminster College in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Feb. 2, 2019.

“The debate competition environment is quite cutting and vicious sometimes. In Ethics Bowl, everyone is working towards truth. We’re trying to figure out what we think is good and right, and our competition is really a conversation with other people who care about this. We’re trying to build instead of just trying to tear things down,” Wells said.

Nagel, who coached both debate and Ethics Bowl teams at Park City, said that when students are given a topic — such as political gerrymandering — their goal is not to necessarily solve the problem, but to present moral justifications for what they would decide to do about the problem, using ethical frameworks taught in philosophy such as utilitarianism or ethics of care.

“The contest is to demonstrate your moral reasoning, and whoever demonstrates that they have thought about the case more deeply and analyzed it more carefully is the way you win,” Nagel said.

But civility matters, too. “There’s a lot of emphasis placed on being courteous and conversational and collegial,” Nagel said.

In fact, civility and respect for opponents is one of the four criteria judges use to decide the winner, said Jeff Nielsen, program coordinator for the Utah Regional High School Ethics Bowl and a fellow at the Center for the Study of Ethics at Utah Valley University.

The criteria are: Is the presentation clear and systematic? Did students identify and discuss relevant moral issues? Did the team’s presentation express awareness of alternate views and other options? Were the students civil and respectful in their presentation?

“If we had more of that among adults, it would be a nice thing,” Nielsen said.

How the bowl works

As director of the national program, Dery works year-round to come up with topics for the students to consider. Some involve national issues; others are moral dilemmas that teens might encounter in real life, such as what to do if they read a sibling’s diary and discover something disturbing.

Dery comes up with 15 topics each year, of which schools can cut three. The teams must then be prepared to discuss and justify their positions on the remaining cases in an event that can last for six hours. Not all 12 cases will come up, but the students don’t know which ones will, so they must be prepared to speak on all of the topics.

This year’s [cases](#), which are available to view on the Parr Center for Ethics website, include the following questions:

- What should we use as the primary criteria for determining how to distribute livers and other vital organs?
- Who bears the primary moral responsibility for widespread use of fake followers on social media?
- What is problematic about the loss (to extinction) of a given species? Are species valuable for their own sake or are they valuable for some other reason?
- To what extent should adults care about the bad deeds of others’ children?
- Is there anything morally objectionable to buying or selling ivory that has come from elephants that have died naturally?
- To what extent does the rate of gun violence in the U.S. justify passing laws to restrict gun ownership?

The winning UCAS team was able to draw from diverse philosophical frameworks in making arguments on organ donation, gerrymandering, de-extinction and loyalty toward friends at work, the students’ coach, Julie Paz, said.

These frameworks included deontology, the idea that the morality of an action should be based on whether that action itself is right or wrong instead of what the consequences of the action are; utilitarianism, the idea that the correct action is one that is best for the greatest number of people; and virtue ethics, the idea that a person's character matters more than duties, rules or consequences of actions.

Paz said all the students showed remarkable reasoning, but also had fun. For example, in discussing issues surrounding extinction, a judge asked the team, "If a species is detrimental to an environment, should we take that species out of the environment?" but warned the students to be careful in their answer.

"The opportunity for teams to not have to fight, but rather to cooperate and still be able to debate, makes it a much more rich academic activity."

Luana Uluave, an English teacher at Waterford School

One student quickly figured out why: The judge was talking about humanity, not other species.

"The teams they competed against were marvelous, too. It's amazing that they can think on their feet and think so quickly and reason through such difficult concepts," Paz said, adding that one judge told her the teens were as adept as students in college ethics bowls.

Faith and ethics

Many, but not all, of the students have been raised in a faith tradition, but religious faith — in philosophy, called divine command theory — is not typically used as a justification for arguments, and Wells, the former Waterford team captain, said only once did her faith contradict a team position.

Wells, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said that one year, her team considered the morality of assisted suicide and had come to the conclusion that it could be ethical under certain circumstances. She later learned that her church is against assisted suicide in all cases, which was a little unsettling, but "it just prompted me to think harder about my position," she said.

The critical thinking that preparation for ethics bowls requires is among its greatest benefits, said Uluave, the Waterford teacher whose team won the national championship in 2015. Uluave also appreciates that two opponents can take essentially the same position, with the ultimate winner doing a better job of explaining the consequences or implications of the dilemma, and of exploring the long-term picture.

"The opportunity for teams to not have to fight, but rather to cooperate and still be able to debate, makes it a much more rich academic activity," she said.

Uluave, whose work with the Ethics Bowl inspired her to become a hospital chaplain, said preparation for a bowl also gave her one of her most memorable moments as a teacher.

When her students were struggling to settle on a position for a case, she said to them, frustrated, "Just choose something that can win."

"They looked at me with their mouths open, and the captain said, 'We're trying to do something meaningful here.' That experience humbled me. Their goal was not to obliterate an opponent. It was to come to some sort of use of civil discourse for the greater understanding of all."

Nagel, in Park City, pointed to a recent address by President Donald Trump as an example of how much political discourse is ineffectual. "Did anybody change their mind after that? The rhetorical value of that was zero," he said, adding, "That's what ethics bowls can do — make people question their own confirmation bias and open up their minds just a little."

And like Uluave, Nielsen also found that his work with ethics bowls has caused him to think more deeply about ethics in his own life.

"My goal is to become a more ethical human being myself, and being involved in this kind of makes me accountable," he said.