

# Curricular Toolkit: Braver Angels Debates for the Classroom and Campus



This activity aims to facilitate honest and authentic dialogue on a controversial proposition. Participants do not focus on “winning” and “beating their opponents.” Rather, they join together in a collective exploration of the topic. The light parliamentary format requires that all questions be addressed to the Chair and reduces the potential for hostile reactivity. Emphasis is placed on lived experiences and each individual’s relationship with the controversy.

Braver Angels Debates can be used for a campus-wide activity or class assignment.

A **campus debate** is typically hosted by a student club or co-curricular program, supported by a faculty member or staff leader. The [Braver Angels College Debates and Discourse](#) team will assist with every step of planning, and provide a Chair to moderate the debate.

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

Because of the activity’s emphasis on depolarization, what is most essential is your set-up. For example, students should know in advance that they should approach the conversation with “humility, not hostility,” and that they should be honest about their own positions while seeking to understand why others might hold different ones. As you adapt the assignment for your needs, take care to keep this part of the assignment at the forefront.

**Your curricular toolkit includes the following components:**

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

We are here to help! If you have questions or need help adapting this activity to your course, contact Mark Urista at [uristam@linnbenton.edu](mailto:uristam@linnbenton.edu)

# Braver Angels College Debates and Discourse Program

## What is the College Debates Program?

- It is a partnership between [Braver Angels](#), [ACTA](#), and [BridgeUSA](#) that teaches students to engage in civil debates on their respective college campuses.



## Why should you host a Braver Angels debate?

- It gives students a transformative experience highlighted by deep listening, critical thinking, and thoughtful communication. As they engage with their peers in a guided setting, students voice and listen to opinions on polarizing topics, and come away with profound appreciation for viewpoint diversity.

## What does a Braver Angels debate look like?

- Braver Angels debates are not competitive, but a collective exercise in searching for truth. They are designed to teach students to engage with others respectfully around difficult and divisive issues.
- Debates are held in classrooms or campus settings; in person or on Zoom; and run between one hour for a classroom debate to two+ hours for a campus-wide or intercollegiate debate.
- They are conducted in a light parliamentary style — guided by a trained chairperson from Braver Angels.
- Each debate centers around a resolution which is chosen in advance by students, a faculty member, or the hosting organization.
- The resolution is crafted to elicit a diverse array of opinions.
- Debates begin with several opening speakers who are selected in advance to speak in favor of or against the resolution.
- Each speaker takes up to four minutes to present their argument, and then answers questions from audience participants who address their questions to the chair.
- After the opening speeches conclude, all participants are invited to make speeches and ask questions. The debate ends with a quick debriefing session.



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

- Students and faculty choose the date, time, and location for the debate.
- Guided by Braver Angels, they craft the resolution and recruit the opening speakers.
- Braver Angels can create Eventbrite listings and advertising materials for students to use to promote the event on campus, via social media, etc.
- Our process is highly collaborative and efficient to economize students' and faculty members' time.



## What are some of the topics that students have chosen for debates?

- *Should controversial speakers be deplatformed?* (Georgia State University)
- *Should colleges impose limits on speech on their campuses?* (Denison University)
- *Should confederate monuments be removed?* (Texas Wesleyan University)
- *Should the Southern border wall be built?* (Arizona State University)
- *Should the government mandate COVID-19 vaccinations?* (Hofstra University)
- *Should Greek Life be eliminated from campus?* (North Carolina State University)
- *Should social media companies regulate content on their platforms?* (Virginia Military Institute)



For more info, visit <https://www.goacta.org/initiatives/college-debates>

If you are interested in hosting a debate, contact:

Doug Sprei – [dsprei@goacta.org](mailto:dsprei@goacta.org)  
Mark Urista – [uristam@linnbenton.edu](mailto:uristam@linnbenton.edu)  
Emily Garcia – [garcia@bridgeusa.org](mailto:garcia@bridgeusa.org)

# Steps for Constructing a Classroom Assignment

## Step 1: Connect with Braver Angels

- Identify a day and time you would like to conduct the debate in your class.
- Contact Mark Urista or Doug Sprei at Braver Angels.
- Mark Urista: [uristam@linnbenton.edu](mailto:uristam@linnbenton.edu).
- Doug Sprei: [dsprei@goacta.org](mailto:dsprei@goacta.org).
- Braver Angels will connect you with a trained chairperson who will facilitate your debate and assist with preparation.

## Step 2: Introduce assignment to students

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

### Goals

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

### Guidelines

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

## Step 3: Selecting a topic

It's typically best to brainstorm a few controversial topics that will elicit a diverse array of viewpoints from your students. Consider local, national, and international topics. In general, current events and conflicts covered in your class can often provide good ideas. Here is a [list of sample topics](#) that Braver Angels has crafted and vetted with students and faculty.

After identifying a few possible topics that can be used for your debate, create a survey using this [Google form](#) that can be sent to students. The results should be able to help you identify which topic is most interesting to your students and will offer a balanced number of participants speaking in favor and against the resolution.

## Step 4: Crafting the resolution from your topic

A well-constructed resolution should allow for good faith arguments on both sides. Resolutions can be policy-based or values-based. Make sure you work directly with your Braver Angels Chair to wordsmith the resolution before revealing it to your students. Here are some examples:

- Resolved: Colleges should impose no limits on speech on their campuses.
- Resolved: The US government should mandate COVID vaccinations.
- Resolved: The US military should intervene in response to human rights violations.
- Resolved: Social media companies should impose no regulation on content, no matter how controversial.
- Resolved: Greek Life should be eliminated from campus.
- Resolved: Online learning does more harm than good.
- Resolved: Healthcare is a human right.

## Step 5: Creating a debate brief

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

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

## Step 6: Selecting initial speakers

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

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

# Resources for Creating a Classroom Assignment

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

## Brief

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

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

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

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

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

## Debate

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

# Rubric

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

## Brief Rubric

Criteria	Effective	Ineffective	Incomplete
<b>Summary of Issue</b>	Student provides a concise summary of the debate issue and defines key terms.	Student fails to demonstrate they understand the debate issue and does not define key terms.	Student fails to demonstrate they understand the debate issue and does not define key terms.
<b>Argumentation</b>	Brief contains three well-constructed arguments. Each contains a claim, source, and evidence.	Brief contains two well-constructed arguments. Each contains a claim, source, and evidence.	The majority of arguments on the brief are poorly constructed.
<b>Sources</b>	Student has a credible source that is properly labeled for each argument.	Student has a credible authority/warrant that is properly labeled for two arguments.	The majority of arguments lack a credible source that is properly labeled.
<b>Examples and Stories</b>	Brief contains an engaging example or story after each argument.	Brief contains an engaging example or story after two arguments.	Brief contains an engaging example or story after only one argument or none at all.

## Debate Rubric

Criteria	Effective	Ineffective	Incomplete
<b>Organization</b>	Speech has a clear intro, body, and conclusion and is delivered for the assigned time.	Speech is satisfactorily structured and is delivered for the assigned time.	Speech is poorly structured, difficult to follow, and is over or under the assigned time.
<b>Argumentation</b>	Student delivers three arguments with proper oral citations.	Student delivers two arguments with proper oral citations.	Student delivers one or no arguments with proper oral citations.
<b>Examples and Stories</b>	Student shares an engaging example or story after each argument.	Student shares an engaging example or story after two arguments.	Student shares an engaging example or story after one argument or fails to provide any during their speech.
<b>Civility</b>	Student displays civility towards other debate participants.	Student struggles to listen to others or gets a bit heated.	Student displays blatant hostility during the debate.
<b>Participation</b>	Student asks a question after two speeches.	Student asks a question after one speech.	Student does not ask any questions.

# Recent and Suggested Collegiate Debate Topics

*These topics were developed by students. For publicity, they are phrased as questions; in actual debates, they are framed as resolutions, e.g. "Resolved: Health care is a human right."*

- Is healthcare a human right?
- Should government provide health care for all citizens?
- Should the U.S. implement more restrictive gun laws to reduce crime?
- Should assault weapons be banned? Should guns be banned on [college campus]?
- Should monuments that are perceived as symbols of racism, such as Confederate statues, be removed from public view?
- Should police departments be defunded?
- Should there be term limits for the Supreme Court?
- Do requirements for voter identification cards and restrictions on mail in ballots suppress voting rights of minorities?
- Should non-discrimination laws take precedence over religious liberty?
- Is "cancel culture" erasing free speech in America?
- Should schools teach about racism? Should schools teach Critical Race Theory?
- Should our immigration laws be changed to allow for quicker citizenship?
- Should children born on US soil to non-citizens automatically have US citizenship?
- Should everyone be required to receive a COVID vaccine?
- Should [college campus] require COVID vaccination for students and staff?
- Should public health considerations outweigh individual civil liberties?
- Does the government have the right to impose mandatory quarantines that deprive individuals of freedom of movement?
- Should the U.S. adopt a completely open borders policy?
- Should the U.S. build the southern border wall?
- Should the US military intervene in response to human rights violations?
- Should journalists value objectivity over advocacy in reporting?
- Should the minimum wage be raised at the Federal level?
- Should transgender athletes compete in women's sports?
- Should colleges disallow controversial speech that could be construed as hate speech?
- Should social media corporations have control over what is said on their platforms and who can use them?
- Can women achieve equality with men without access to abortion?



# Template for Debate Brief

**Resolution:**

**Definition and source for key term(s):**

**Summary of the issue:**

**Central narrative:**

**Claim 1:**

**Source:**

**Evidence:**

**Explanation:**

**Claim 2:**

**Source:**

**Evidence:**

**Explanation:**

**Claim 3:**

**Source:**

**Evidence:**

**Explanation:**

**Bibliography**

# Sample Braver Angels Debate Brief

**Resolution:** The costs of a higher education outweigh the benefits.

**Definition and source for key term:** According to the Cambridge Dictionary, “higher education” is: “education at a college or university where subjects are studied at an advanced level.”

**Summary of the issue:** Higher education is a major investment for many individuals and families. It has long been accepted that college provides a high return for those who choose to attend. However, people are beginning to doubt whether this investment is worth the great amounts of money colleges and universities are charging students. Additionally, students are increasingly skeptical about the classes they take and how much the classes contribute to learning and growth.

## Affirmative

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

**Claim 1:** Job prospects for college graduates are dismal.

**Source:** Heidi Shierholz, Natalie Sabadish & Nicholas Finio (**source**)  
Economists (**qualification**)

*The Class of 2013* report via The Economic Policy Institute’s website published April 10, 2013 (**source & date**)

**Evidence:** “There has been a dramatic increase in unemployment amongst recent college graduates since 2007. Anemic job growth in conjunction with declining wages, salaries, and benefits amount to a difficult job market for the graduating classes of 2014, 2015, and 2016.”

**Explanation:** Many people go to college so they can get a degree that will allow them to get a good job. However, many of us know someone who recently graduated from college who isn’t working or is doing a job they could have gotten without a college degree. My good friend who majored in Interdisciplinary Studies is currently working as a barista at Starbucks alongside people who only have a high school diploma. They’re all doing the same work and receiving the same pay.

**Claim 2:** College graduates are burdened with a high amount of debt.

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

The Institute for College Access and Success (**qualification**)  
*projectonstudentdebt.org* published October 2012 (**source & date**)

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

**Explanation:** After completing college, many graduates envision traveling, purchasing a home, and buying goods like a new vehicle. Unfortunately, these purchases can end up being out of reach due to monthly student loan payments. My brother graduated 10 years

ago and is still paying off his student loans. He has been unable to buy a house and is still driving his 1999 Honda Accord. Additionally, a large amount of debt can contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. My brother feels hopeless and often questions his choice to attend college.

**Claim 3:** Students don't learn much in college.

**Source:** Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (**source**)  
Professors of Sociology (**qualification**)  
NYU & Univ. of VA (**backing**)  
*Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (**source**)  
Published January, 2011 (**date**)

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

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

**Claim 4:** A college education isn't necessary for obtaining a good job.

**Source:** Mike Rowe (**source**)  
Media personality and host of *Dirty Jobs* (**qualification**)  
Interview on *Real Time with Bill Maher* that aired on July 12, 2013 (**source & date**)

**Evidence:** "There are over 3 million good paying jobs right now [that don't require a college degree] and nobody wants them."

**Explanation:** I know many people who didn't graduate from college who have great jobs. Many blue-collar positions provide more pay than positions that require a bachelor's degree. For example, one of my good friends got an apprenticeship as an HVAC technician and is now a journeyman who makes great money and owns his own home. For folks who enjoy working with their hands, these jobs are much more attractive than classes that are heavy on lectures, discussions, and papers.

## Negative

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

**Claim 1:** Millennials between the ages of 25-32 with a BA are more likely to be employed compared to those with less education.

**Source:** Pew Research Center (**source & qualification**)  
*The Rising Cost of Not Going to College* (**source**)  
Published on February 11, 2014 (**date**)

**Evidence:** “The unemployment rate for graduates with a B.A. is 3.8% compared to 8.1% for those with a two-year degree or some college and 12.2% for those who only have a high school diploma.”

**Explanation:** The numbers don't lie. College graduates are more likely to be employed than non-college graduates. My mom graduated from a university and has always been able to find a decent job, regardless if the economy is weak or strong. Employers are impressed that she has a bachelor's degree and her education has provided her with the ability to learn new jobs and skills quickly.

**Claim 2:** College graduates with a BA earn more than those with less education.

**Source:** Pew Research Center (**source & qualification**)  
*The Rising Cost of Not Going to College* (**source**)  
Published on February 11, 2014 (**date**)

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

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

**Claim 3:** College trains the mind for a globalized world that is constantly evolving.

**Source:** A.G. Lafley (**source**)  
Former Proctor & Gamble Chairman (**qualification**)  
Supply Corps Officer, US Navy (**backing**)  
Huffington Post article: *A Liberal Education: Preparation for Career Success* (**source**)  
Last updated on February 5, 2012

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

**Explanation:** It's very rare for a person to work with the same organization for their entire career. Jobs are also changing at a rapid pace--many of the positions that people will be applying for a decade from now either don't currently exist or require problem-solving skills that few people possess. College teaches a person how to think and is one of the best ways to prepare for an uncertain future. During the Great Recession of 2008 my girlfriend was a graphic designer and her firm laid off a bunch of people. She not only kept her job, but was promoted to a newly created position. Her supervisor said it was because she was consistently the only employee who stayed on top of software updates and was not only able to teach herself, but was also able to train others. My girlfriend credits her experiences in college as developing her ability to do this.

**Claim 4:** The college experience provides an exceptional opportunity to focus on the development of oneself.

**Source:** Arthur Chickering (**source**)

Education researcher in the field of student affairs (**qualification**)

*Education and Identity* (**source**)

Published in 1969 (**date**)

**Evidence:** “College has the capacity to help students develop intellectual competence, manage emotions, become autonomous, establish their identity, develop meaningful relationships, clarify their purpose in life, and develop integrity.”

**Explanation:** I showed up to my local community college as a high school dropout who could barely hold a job. At the time, I was immature, had poor time management, and no direction in life. During my time in community college, I grew into a mature, responsible, and goal-oriented individual. I’ve seen this story play out time and time again and believe it can be experienced by anyone who is committed to benefiting from their college journey.

## Bibliography

### Affirmative

**Claim 1:** Finio, Nicholas, et al. “The Class of 2013: Young Graduates Still Face Dim Job Prospects.” *Economic Policy Institute*, 10 Apr. 2013, <https://www.epi.org/publication/class-of-2013-graduates-job-prospects/>.

**Claim 2:** “Student Debt and the Class of 2011 - Ed.” *Project on Student Debt*, The Institute for College Access and Success, Oct. 2012, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537338.pdf>.

**Claim 3:** Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

**Claim 4:** Rowe, Mike. Interview with Bill Maher, *Real Time with Bill Maher*. HBO. 12 Jul. 2013.

### Negative

**Claims 1 and 2:** “Education: The Rising Cost of Not Going to College.” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 11 Feb. 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>.

**Claim 3:** Lafley, A.G. “A Liberal Education: Preparation for Career Success.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 5 Feb. 2012, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-liberal-education-prepa\\_b\\_1132511](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-liberal-education-prepa_b_1132511).

**Claim 4:** Chickering, Arthur W. *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969. Print.