

Ethics Bowl Overview

The Ethics Bowl events are in association with IIT and the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics. More information can be found at <https://appe-ethics.org/ethics-bowl/>

In the past community colleges have not participated in the EB events, but I think this is a good opportunity for Cabrillo students.

I. What is the Ethics Bowl?

The Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl competition is inspired by TV's College Bowl, but modified rules adapt the game to the subject of ethics. In Ethics Bowl, a moderator poses questions to teams of three to five students. Questions may address ethical problems on classroom topics (e.g. cheating or plagiarism), personal relationships (e.g. dating or friendship), professional ethics (e.g. engineering, law, medicine), or social and political ethics (e.g. free speech, gun control, etc.) Each team receives a set of ethical issues in advance of the competition, and questions posed to teams at the competition are taken from that set. A panel of judges evaluates answers; rating criteria are clarity and intelligibility, focus on ethically relevant factors, avoidance of ethical irrelevance, and deliberative thoughtfulness.

The IEB is a tiered competition in which the top scoring thirty-two teams in ten regional ethics bowls compete against one another at a national ethics bowl. At the national ethics bowl participating teams will compete in three matches during the morning on the day of the event. In the evening the top scoring eight teams will compete in an eight team elimination consisting of four quarter-final matches, two semi-final matches, and a final match.

In both the regional ethics bowls and the national ethics bowl, four to six weeks prior to the day of the event, each entered team, as well as every judge and moderator, will receive a set of ethics bowl cases. The questions asked of teams are to be taken from this set. Moderators and judges will be drawn from distinguished individuals in diverse fields, such as law, medicine, business, government service, engineering, science, academia, and other fields as well.

II. Why is the Ethics Bowl important for students?

Participants research and analyze ethical dilemmas drawn from a wide range of areas (environmental ethics, biomedical ethics, business ethics, institutional ethics, personal ethics, etc.). The goal is to resolve and justify the resolutions of these dilemmas. Ethics Bowl has valuable educational applications. First, it demonstrates and reinforces the fact that theoretical ethical concepts and procedures have practical utility. By encouraging an appreciation of the application of ethical theory to lived moral dilemmas, Ethics Bowl acknowledges recent pedagogical research demonstrating that students learn--and retain--more when the relevance to "real life" of instructional content is clear. Second, Ethics Bowl simultaneously addresses concerns of both academic and professional realms. Academics want students who are conversant with major philosophical conceptions (e.g., Utilitarianism, Kantianism) and who appreciate their relevance to actual moral problems. The professional community, on the other hand, seeks professionals who see themselves as members of a community with shared values virtues, and who are able to avoid or resolve concrete moral dilemmas that arise in the professional arena.

With its focus on critical thinking and intellectual rigor, Ethics Bowl fosters a view of ethical deliberation as an analytical activity undertaken by persons who share standards of right and wrong as they relate to ethical questions. Both the communal and analytical aspects of ethics are captured by Ethics Bowl's group-centered approach to deliberation and by contestants' interaction with the judges who recognize similar values and actions as appropriate (or not). This convergence of judgment about the nature and quality of ethical reasoning on difficult issues among distinguished individuals in different walks of life reinforces students' sense of ethical standards as relevant, as shared, and as important to professional performance.

Finally, Ethics Bowl gives students a chance to flex their burgeoning intellectual muscles. Student discussions of the Ethics Bowl questions stimulate participation from every student. The small group environment and an audience of peers encourage intellectual interaction. In addition, students have the opportunity to teach each other, to identify and rectify their own factual and interpretive errors, thereby--again--availing themselves of strategies that maximize learning.¹

III. How Ethics Bowl is Played

In Ethics Bowl a moderator asks two teams of three to five undergraduate students questions that pose ethical problems on topics ranging widely over areas such as the classroom (e.g. cheating or plagiarism), personal relationships (e.g. dating or friendship), professional ethics (e.g. engineering, architecture, business, the military, law, medicine, etc.) or social and political ethics (e.g. free speech, gun control, health care, etc.) In an Ethics Bowl competition two teams are asked different questions. Each team answers its question according to the following format. After the moderator poses a question to a team the team gets one minute to confer, after which it must state its answer. (The team does not respond completely cold, however, because prior to the Ethics Bowl each competing team receives a set of cases that present ethical issues upon which the questions a team must answer at the Ethics Bowl are based.)

After the team states its answer to the question posed by the moderator the judges then have an opportunity to ask the team brief follow-up questions to elicit a team's viewpoint on ethically important aspects of the question, or to seek clarification of a team's response. After the judges have asked their questions, the opposing team then has one minute to present a response to the first team's answer. The first team then has an opportunity to respond to the opposing team's comments.

In an ethics bowl match, teams are **not** assigned “pro” and “con” sides of an ethical issue. Rather, each team’s goal—in its preparations prior to the ethics bowl—is to ensure it has identified the ethically relevant considerations relative to the issues raised by the assigned cases, and to analyze the importance of the considerations to reach agreement upon positions that the team feels it can explain and defend. Likewise, an opposing team’s comment in an ethics bowl match is based upon its judgment concerning a position it can reasonably explain and defend on the case. The opposing team’s role is not necessarily to argue against the presenting team’s response, but to continue the discussion in a manner that exemplifies the best methods of ethical reasoning about complex, difficult to resolve, and highly viewpoint-dependent cases. Thus, “one-upsmanship,” and verbal aggressiveness will not win, and probably will lose, points in an

¹ Michael Jordan, NHU, San Jose CA

ethics bowl match. The judges' evaluation criteria reinforce efforts by a team to analyze issues presented by a case in a clear, focused, and thoughtful manner, helping them to understand and appreciate the force of considerations that weigh heavily in the thinking on the issues of others who take differing positions from their own.

The judges have been instructed prior to the Ethics Bowl concerning the criteria they are to apply in evaluating the teams' answers, which are the following:

Clarity and Intelligibility: Has the team stated and defended its position in a way that is logically consistent and which allows the Judges to understand clearly the team's line of reasoning?

Focus on Ethically Relevant Factors: Has the team identified and discussed the factors the Judges consider ethically relevant in connection with the case?

Avoidance of Ethical Irrelevance: Has the team stayed on track by avoiding preoccupation with issues that the Judges do not regard as ethically relevant, or as only having minor ethical relevance, in connection with a case?

Deliberative Thoughtfulness: Does the Team's presentation of its position on a question indicate both awareness and thoughtful consideration of different viewpoints, including especially those that could loom large in the reasoning of individuals who might disagree with the team's position?

IV. Format

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In both the regional ethics bowls and the national ethics bowl, four to six weeks prior to the day of the event, each entered team, as well as every judge and moderator, will receive a set of ethics bowl cases. The questions asked of teams are to be taken from this set. As in previous ethics bowls, the moderators and judges will be drawn from distinguished individuals in diverse fields, such as law, medicine, business, government service, engineering, science, academia, and other fields as well.

V. The Educational Value and Significance of Ethics Bowl

Starting in 1993 as a small intramural event at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), organized by IIT's Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions (CSEP), the IEB has grown to become a national competition in which so many schools wished to take part that it became necessary to reorganize and expand it into its current format, involving ten regional ethics bowls

throughout the United States, and a national ethics bowl in which the top scoring teams in the regional ethics bowls compete with one another. Here are some of the reasons why we believe that the IEB has appealed so strongly to educators in the area of practical and professional ethics.

Participating in the IEB develops students' intellectual abilities and capacities, deepens their ethical understanding, and reinforces their sense of ethical commitment. With regard to the development of intellectual abilities and capacities, the most salient ethical issues for college and university students are complicated and ambiguous. Contrary to the implied message of a bestselling book published several years ago, everything one needs to know about ethical issues on topics such as cheating, plagiarism, personal relationships, gender inequality, campus political controversies, and business or professional ethics in a future career can't be learned in kindergarten. Dealing with such issues places heavy demands upon students' abilities to discern, analyze, and evaluate, as well as upon their capacity to maintain a well-organized mental focus under conditions of intellectual (and emotional) uncertainty. IEB participation brings all these abilities and capacities directly into play.

Furthermore, students deepen their ethical understanding of complex, ambiguous, and highly viewpoint dependent questions through participating in the IEB. Ethical understanding in connection with such issues consists largely of the capability to view from the inside ethical positions with which one disagrees, so that one understands the concerns motivating those positions, and, to some extent, appreciates their force. In this regard, students report that when discussing IEB questions before a competition, team members often begin from sharply divergent positions, but as discussion proceeds one or the other of two outcomes tends to result. Sometimes differences of opinion narrow with further discussion. In many instances, however, this does not happen, and yet the students still succeed in reaching agreement upon what their response will be to a given question if asked it at the IEB. This is because the team members who personally disagree with the response have come to view it as a defensible position that a reasonable and responsible person could hold.

Finally, participation in the IEB, we believe, can reinforce a student's sense of ethical commitment. Although the natural competitive inclination of students undoubtedly sparks their interest in the IEB, in our experience this factor has not dominated the event. We like to think that at the conclusion of the IEB the contestants, judges, moderators, and audience experience a sense of coming together, characteristic of joint participation in a significant and valued activity, guided by shared standards with which the participants deeply identify. This is the way it ought to be in our judgment, and the way we want to keep it.

We believe strongly that the IEB fills a unique niche in practical and professional ethics education. It is also great fun.²

² "The Educational Significance of the Ethics Bowl," Robert F. Ladenson, in *Teaching Ethics* (1:1: 2001).