



CASE STUDY

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HOW UNIVERSITY OF DENVER FACULTY USE DEBATE TO FOSTER CONSTRUCTIVE DISAGREEMENT ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Since 2022, a faculty-built classroom debate program has brought more than 250 structured debates into University of Denver classrooms, in fields ranging from gender studies to the natural sciences. Led by a team of faculty with extensive debate experience and the chancellor's backing, "Debate Across the Curriculum" (DAC) treats debate not as a zero-sum contest to win but as a shared search for meaning and truth. DAC is an integral part of the John and Sandy Miller National Academy for Free Expression and Pluralism at the University of Denver.



While many universities have debate teams, no one else is doing what Debate Across the Curriculum is doing: encouraging students to make evidence-based arguments both for and against a topic in their class *rather than choosing a side based on their own beliefs*. In my experience, most college students have never had to explore the strongest opposing arguments to the beliefs they hold. DAC will teach them what a valuable skill that is. DAC should be in every college classroom in America.

— **MARY KATE CARY**

Executive Director,
John and Sandy Miller
National Academy for Free
Expression and Pluralism at
the University of Denver



CASE AT A GLANCE

- Founded by communication studies professor, HxA member, and longtime debate coach Darrin Hicks, the DAC program team has facilitated more than 250 classroom debates reaching over 3,000 students.
- DAC is designed around three principles: noncompetition, full participation, and random side assignment. This model challenges students to consider arguments from multiple contrasting perspectives on a given topic related to their class, then revisit the view they held prior to the debate.
- Pre- and post-debate surveys of roughly 1,400 University of Denver students show promising gains in topic knowledge, comfort in speaking up, and intellectual humility, alongside decreases in measures of affective polarization.
- Nearly all participating faculty surveyed said they would recommend the DAC approach to a colleague. The program is now a signature initiative in the university's free expression work.

THE CHALLENGE

Across higher education, colleges and universities are grappling with how to train students to engage with the difficult and controversial questions that accompany citizenship in a pluralistic democracy. The DAC team and senior leadership at the University of Denver sought to address several concerning trends among students: a decline in critical civic capacities such as evidence-based reasoning; **rising self-censorship** due to fear of judgment from peers and reprisal from instructors; and a phenomenon Darrin Hicks and others call “typecasting,” in which students preface statements with their social identities rather than allowing their thoughts to stand on their own.



THE CHANGE

DAC's premise is that debate is among the most effective ways to develop public reasoning skills and cultivate the ethical dispositions that civic engagement requires. Toward these ends, Darrin worked with the chancellor and provost to develop the DAC approach:

1

Redesigning Debate Around Three Principles

No winners or losers. Every student is expected to fully participate. Every student gets to speak for the same amount of time and respond to the same number of questions. Since students are assigned to sides of the debate at random, students can be asked to argue against their personal views and learn to articulate the strongest arguments for perspectives they don't share.

2

Pairing Instructors with Trained Facilitators

Unlike course interventions that hand over a program to faculty and then step away, DAC facilitators — who have more than a century of combined competitive debate experience — work alongside the instructor across three classroom visits (not including an initial consultation): orientation and role assignment, the debate itself, and a debrief in which students set aside their assigned advocacy positions to reason together. Large classes are typically handled with team formats (e.g., groups of six). This structure keeps debates consistent and constructive.

3

Scaling Through a Campus-Wide Coalition

The program has been integrated into existing courses across the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, math, statistics, and business. Faculty participate by choice, and DAC facilitators offer a set of **practical resources** that faculty can adapt, including debate templates, rubrics, reflection prompts, and a debater's code of conduct. The program has also grown with **institutional backing** from the chancellor's office.

4

Incorporating Rigorous Evaluation from the Start

Regular peer observation among DAC facilitators helps ensure that debate design and quality stay consistent as the program grows. Pre- and post-debate surveys generate evidence that is used to refine the program and make the case for its impact and scalability.



THE IMPACT

- According to pre- and post-survey results from three years of data, students **report** growth in their comprehension of the topics they debated and more comfort voicing views on controversial issues with both their peers and instructors. Some instructors **observed** their quiet students begin to speak more.
- Students develop intellectual humility. Among students who entered the program saying they were “rarely wrong,” more than half (55%) **later agreed** that their views change with evidence, and about a quarter (27%) admitted they had previously overlooked evidence.
- Students **report** less polarized attitudes on the debated topic and more empathy toward classmates who disagree.
- Faculty — even those who were initially skeptical — **overwhelmingly say** they would recommend DAC to colleagues (of 44 faculty surveyed, only one responded ‘neutral’).

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

Start Small, Dream Big

Find a willing departmental colleague, build evidence, and grow incrementally.

Establish Classroom Norms from the Outset

Set the tone with **expectations** and **strategies** for handling contentious topics. Prepare **model resources** that faculty can easily adapt and use for planning their debate approach.

Prioritize Fidelity Over Reach

Writing a good debate topic and moderating a live discussion takes training and practice. It’s better to have a few thoughtfully facilitated debates than many haphazard ones.

Build Evaluation into the Design

Pre- and post-debate surveys allow program leads to track outcomes, refine the debate experience, and make the case to leadership and faculty using data-driven stories.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR COURSE INSTRUCTORS

Bringing Debate Across the Curriculum into your classroom does not require becoming a debate expert yourself. This model is facilitator-based: experienced debate practitioners help you design the exercise and run the debate, which frees you to focus on your students. Here are several steps to begin.



Scan the QR code to learn how you can drive reforms that build cultures of open inquiry in the classroom.

Need to get in touch? Email us at research@heterodoxacademy.org

Learn What the Model Involves

As the founder of the University of Denver's Debate Across the Curriculum program, Darrin can walk interested faculty through what the model asks of you and your students, share what has worked across various disciplines, and help you avoid common missteps. If you can, **sign up** for one of his workshops to learn more about the debate format and methodology.

Tailor Resources to Your Course

Working with debate facilitators, use the existing **templates**, including debate designs, evaluation rubrics, and deliberation tools, and shape them to a controversy drawn from your own syllabus. Framing that controversy as a proposition with two to five sub-issues will help keep even large classes focused and provide a variety of arguments for students to make.

Invite a Colleague

Enlist one or two colleagues to run debates in the same term. Though not essential, doing so provides a basis for comparison and helps demonstrate the exercise's value beyond a single classroom on your campus.

Consult your Local Leadership

If you plan on developing a curricular program (beyond one course), having discussions with your department chair or dean can help resolve early concerns (e.g., scheduling questions) as well as turn up signs of support.