



The growth of Ethics Bowls: a pedagogical tool to develop moral reasoning in a complex world

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Abstract

The first Ethics Bowl competition was established in the 1990s by Dr. Robert Ladenson of the Illinois Institute of Technology to help students reason through ethical challenges they will face in their personal and professional lives, and help them develop responsibilities as citizens of a democracy. Since then, the Ethics Bowl format and its pedagogical goals have been adapted to many other academic disciplines and a variety of student and professional populations. Our aim was to quantify the growth of the Ethics Bowl concept by enumerating and describing extant Ethics Bowl programs, outlining both pedagogical goals and operational aspects. Using respondent-driven sampling, we identified 20 Ethics Bowl programs across the globe, reaching tens of thousands of participants annually, and an additional two programs preparing to launch in the near future. We conclude by making recommendations for pedagogical and operational dimensions of the programs.

Keywords Ethics Bowl · Ethics education · Teaching ethics · Experiential ethics pedagogy

Introduction

Established in the early 1990s by Robert Ladenson of the Illinois Institute of Technology, Ethics Bowl competitions are designed to help students reason through inevitable ethical challenges they will face in their personal and professional lives, and help them develop their responsibilities as citizens of a democracy (Ladenson 2001, 2018). The first several Ethics Bowl competitions were intramural events between a couple of teams at the Illinois Institute of Technology, and by 1995, Professor Ladenson had invited a few nearby colleges to participate, increasing the number of colleges participating to four (Ladenson 2001). In 1997, the first Association for Practical and

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Professional Ethics (APPE) Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl (IEB) was held with 14 teams competing; the University of Montana won the championship (APPE 2020).

The goal of the APPE IEB® is to provide an opportunity for students to gain healthy respect and understanding for rational civil discourse through the development of skills in critical thinking, moral reasoning, public speaking, and teamwork (Ladenson 2001). The pedagogical method employed to reach program goals includes the use of competition to motivate multidisciplinary teams of undergraduate students from a variety of majors to work together to find a way forward on an ethically challenging case study. Using ethical reasoning, deliberation, presentation skills, and team competition, students are immersed with their teams in a unique pedagogical experience throughout the school year.

The typical APPE IEB® team consists of one or more coaches and a group of undergraduate students from various majors who are interested in wrestling with the morally demanding problems of our time. Teams vary in size between five and 20 (or more) students of all genders, who participate in the preparation activities throughout the school year. At the competition, each team must choose five members to represent it and sit at the table to engage in the case presentation and deliberation.

In a typical national APPE IEB® competition held in early spring, teams that have spent the year preparing, competing with each other and against other teams in the area. Ultimately, teams who are interested in competing in the national finals must earn a spot by winning one of 12 regional qualifying competitions usually held in November. At the national competition, teams face 35 other similarly-prepared teams in a series of elimination rounds until the final two teams compete in the final round for the title of APPE IEB® champion. Each round includes two ethically complex case studies, with each team providing an opening analysis of the central moral issues associated with the case and the specific question presented by the moderator. The opposing team then responds with a commentary of the initial team's analysis with the intention of furthering the moral exploration of the case. The initial team then has an opportunity to respond to the opposing team's commentary, deepening the deliberation of the key ethical issues. Essential in both teams' commentary is the inclusion of alternative ethical and moral perspectives. A panel of three judges provides additional probing questions to assist both teams with the case analysis (Ladenson 2001). The judges then score each team's contributions based on an established rubric that includes identification of morally relevant aspects of the case, clarity and consistency of arguments, and deliberative methods.

Ladenson (2012) has described the important pedagogical value of the competitive aspects of the APPE IEB®. For post-secondary students, competition can be effective to motivate initial participation in the program and plays an important role in maintaining student commitment to learning and improving ethical decision-making skills throughout the academic year. With an annual national intercollegiate championship at stake, students and teams hone their skills to identify ethical dimensions of a case, articulate a variety of perspectives, deliberate to find a way forward in ethically complex situations (PCSBI 2016).

Since the first APPE IEB® was held in the 1990s, the number of teams participating in this method of ethics learning has more than doubled. Even more teams compete at the regional events or with other colleges and universities in their geographic area. With the program's growth, APPE has been increasingly interested in learning about the

impact of the activity. As we talked with Ethics Bowl organizers, coaches, and teams across the country, we learned that the Ethics Bowl format and its pedagogical goals have been adapted to many other academic disciplines and a variety of student and professional populations. In an effort to document the spread of the method as one measure of impact, the aim of the current project was to quantify for the first time the growth of the Ethics Bowl concept since the early 1990s. We enumerated and described extant Ethics Bowl programs, outlining their sponsors, funding levels, workforce, reach, pedagogical goals, and related characteristics.

Methods

We used respondent-driven sampling to enumerate existing Ethics Bowl programs. We began by listing Ethics Bowl programs about which members of the APPE Board and the APPE IEB® Council were aware, followed by an online search for additional programs. We used the search terms “ethics bowl” and “ethics competition” to identify additional programs. When we contacted bowl organizers for information about their programs, we asked them to share other Ethics Bowls programs about which they knew. We continued this method until we reached saturation, the point at which no new programs were identified.

From each Ethics Bowl program, we collected information about pedagogical topics such as learning goals and outcome assessments, as well as operational topics such as financing and staffing. We obtained information from programs’ websites, if available. If not, we inquired by email or phone.

We subset the Ethics Bowl programs into those that held a competition with Ethics Bowl teams outside of their home institution or organization, and those that did not. We further described the characteristics of these programs with an emphasis on pedagogical goals, methods, outcome measures, student reach, and inspiration for development of the program.

Results

We identified 20 Ethics Bowl programs and three additional programs pending launch in the near term. Eighteen existing programs included competition with other teams from outside their educational institution (see Table 1), and two held intramural competitions or classroom exercises. Tens of thousands of students of all ages across the globe participate in Ethics Bowls activities each year, representing an enormous increase from the few teams at one institution in the 1990s.

Pedagogical features

Of the 18 programs that held an external competition, five programs were discipline-specific, including bioethics, business, archaeology, and engineering. Thirteen programs considered ethics topics from any field. All programs incorporated contemporary ethical challenges when developing cases for annual competitions.

Table 1. Ethics bowl programs with extramural competition, worldwide, 2020

Bowl Name	Location
Association for Practical and Professional Ethics Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl (APPE IEB®)	United States
Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges Ethics Bowl	United States
North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities Ethics Bowl	United States
Independent Colleges of Washington Ethics Bowl	United States
Kuwait Ethics Bowl	Kuwait
Lockheed Martin Ethics in Engineering Case Competition	United States
IEEE Student Ethics Competition	Multiple countries
Bioethics Bowl	United States
International Business Ethics Case Competition	Multiple countries
Archaeology Ethics Bowl	United States
Faculty Ethics Bowl	United States
Prison Ethics Bowl	United States
High School Ethics Bowl	United States
Canadian High School Ethics Bowl	Canada
John Stuart Mill Cup	United Kingdom
Ethics Olympiad	Australia and New Zealand
Outreach Invitational Ethics Bowl	United States
Middle School Ethics Bowl	United States

All 18 programs had pedagogical goals similar to those of APPE IEB®. Eleven of the programs were explicitly inspired by the APPE IEB® and Ladenson's pedagogical goals; four additional programs were implicitly inspired by APPE IEB® by sharing the pedagogical goals of APPE IEB® or indicating that they were inspired by a program that had similar goals. Given that the majority of programs were inspired by and modeled after APPE IEB®, there were not consequential operational or pedagogical differences by program or country.

Of 14 programs with explicit pedagogical goals, most included development of ethical awareness and recognition of pluralistic values, as well as development of skills in critical thinking, civil discourse, problem solving, and public speaking. Of four programs without explicitly documented pedagogical goals, two indicated that the goals were similar to those outlined by APPE IEB®.

Evaluating the ability of Ethics Bowl programs to meet their pedagogical goals was reported as a major challenge for organizers. Of programs with explicit goals, all organizers expressed a desire to quantify the changes they see in student participants, but have found it challenging to do so, both methodologically and in terms of finding support to design an effective program evaluation project. Seven programs attempt some type of evaluation, five use participant surveys, one provides anecdotes from participants and judges, and one uses year-to-year student self-assessments of possession of desired

skills such as presentation skills, openness to others' opinions, and confidence in expressing opposing views.

While the original Ethics Bowl was designed for undergraduate college students, the reach of current programs spans middle school through active professionals. Eight Ethics Bowl programs are designed for undergraduate college students and three involve both undergraduate and graduate students. Four focus on high school/secondary school students, one includes middle school students, and one includes both. One competition is intended for working professionals who have already completed their training.

Several programs reported the important role of volunteer judges and moderators with respect to engaging practicing professionals from a variety of fields who might otherwise not engage directly and explicitly with the ethical dimensions of their work. Thus, the opportunity for coaches, judges, and moderators to participate in Ethics Bowls as volunteers provides a secondary ethics pedagogy benefit for professionals themselves.

Although we excluded them from our summary analysis, we identified numerous descriptions of Ethics Bowl activities used in classrooms across all grades, including K-12, undergraduate, and graduate majors and courses (see, for example, De Souza-Hart and Ho 2014; Meyer 2012; Merrick et al. 2016, 2017). These programs had pedagogical goals similar to the APPE IEB®, but conducted the methods within the requirements of a course for credit, rather than an extracurricular competitive activity. While student motivation for participation might differ (for example, to earn a grade rather than year-long preparation for a national competition), the expansion into the classroom indicates the usefulness of the pedagogical method of the Ethics Bowl for teaching ethics as both a curricular and co-curricular activity.

Operational features

Most Ethics Bowl programs have an organizational sponsor, which is responsible for operations, planning, financial, and logistical support. Seven programs are sponsored by a professional organization. An additional 10 programs are sponsored by an institution of higher education, including seven programs that are supported by an ethics center within a higher education institution. One of these programs was initially supported by a professional organization, but was subsequently moved to an ethics center in a university. One program is sponsored by a corporation and one by a partnership with a governmental agency and professional organization.

The cost of running an annual Ethics Bowl program varied widely from a low of approximately \$3700 (US dollars) to a high of an estimated \$130,000 (US dollars). Ethics Bowl funding is largely dependent on one-time donations from foundations, individuals, and companies, as well as in-kind personnel time from the sponsoring entity, coaches, universities, and judges. Of the 13 programs that provided staffing data, two reported zero dedicated full time equivalent (FTE) positions, four reported less than one FTE, and two reported two FTEs dedicated to running the annual program. All programs reported relying heavily on volunteers, who participate in a variety of roles from full time program director to hundreds of one-time judges and moderators at the annual competition.

Discussion and recommendations

Since the first Ethics Bowl was developed in the early 1990s as a pedagogical tool to promote ethical problem solving and build capacity for civic participation in a democracy, the method has been adapted to a variety of settings, student and professional populations, and learning communities. In his 2001 article describing the Ethics Bowl, Ladenson (2001, 77) stated, “The Ethics Bowl has developed and grown in ways I never anticipated when I created it in 1993.” Twenty years on from that observation and nearly 30 years on from the first intramural Ethics Bowl competition, the Ethics Bowl continues to grow as one of the most comprehensive pedagogical tools to teach practical ethics skills across all levels. Ethics Bowl competitions have been implemented in as early as middle school, continue through high school, post-secondary colleges and universities, and beyond, into the professions.

Despite various age and academic levels, all Ethics Bowl programs shared similar pedagogical goals. These goals align broadly with ethics competencies needed to navigate many of life’s challenges bioethics (PCSBI 2016), as well as for nearly all professions, including public health (Lee 2018), engineering (NSPE 2013), and social work (Barsky 2019). The ability to identify ethical dimensions of challenging problems, to elucidate and articulate the various ethical perspectives of affected communities, and to productively deliberate through to a practical solution are essential skills in every profession and in civic life writ large.

Measuring the success of the Ethics Bowl experience with respect to the pedagogical goals of the program has been challenging in part due to a lack of resources to dedicate to the task, and in part due to the methodologic difficulties in measuring improvements in desired outcomes such as moral reasoning, teamwork, and respect for rational civil discourse. Ultimately these outcomes should lead to improvements in ethical decision making, which is also affected by other psychological, social, and professional influences. Ethics Bowl programs would benefit from evaluation by educational researchers who can apply multidisciplinary methods to examine the role of program participation on such hard to measure constructs.

As Ethics Bowl programs have grown, the funding and operational model continues to reflect a small, start-up model of one-time donations and volunteers. For more established programs engaging in efforts to broaden their reach, this funding model has become challenging. The Ethics Bowl pedagogical method of teaching practical and professional ethics would be greatly enhanced through consistent, reliable funding sources for the operational tasks, while continuing to rely on volunteer engagement to achieve second-order pedagogical benefits for volunteers. As Ethics Bowl programs expand into all age groups and numerous professions, funding is needed for programs across all life stages, from primary school through retirement.

Conclusion

Over the past 30 years, the number of Ethics Bowl programs has grown to reach students and professionals across the globe. With the decline in funding of social studies and civics across American schools and the associated consequences of failing to teach these subjects (Byrd and Varga 2018), introducing a co-curricular opportunity

for all students to gain a healthy respect and understanding for rational civil discourse, and to develop skills in critical thinking, moral reasoning, public speaking, and teamwork seems more important than ever. As an engaging practical ethics pedagogy, Ethics Bowl competitions provide exposure to the ethical underpinnings of practical and professional life as well as the practice of civil discourse and deliberative problem solving in a variety of disciplinary and practical settings. In our increasingly polarized world, perhaps the growth of the Ethics Bowl will inspire additional adaptations in and outside of educational settings, nurturing the development of ethical analysis and decision-making skills among all professions.

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