

Stakeholder Meetings as a Means of Engaging Student Learning of Complex Social Problems

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Abstract

A traditional debate format, in which a small group of students is given the task of presenting arguments for or against a particular issue, can promote pro and con dualism that is both incomplete and counter to developing a sociological imagination. In this article, the authors describe their efforts to avoid this kind of dualism through the development and implementation of a set of stakeholder meetings. They first examine the rationale for developing this method and then describe a particular classroom application of this type of debate. Next, the authors describe their assessment of the exercise both independent of and relative to traditional debates. They conclude by identifying some potential difficulties and make suggestions about the transferability to other academic settings.

Keywords

stakeholders, debates, different perspectives, arguments, presentations

Educators have long recognized the value of in-class debates as a way to both reinforce basic course material and engage students in higher-order thought processes (Bloom 1956; Combs and Bourne 1994; Kennedy 2007). Debates move students from passive learning (e.g., lecture and note-taking) that encourages and rewards memorization and retention and toward a more active form of learning that requires students to evaluate evidence and form arguments (Crone 1997; Green and Klug 1990). Kennedy (2007: 184) notes that in-class debates require “higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation [which] focus on *how* to think” as opposed to “rote learning or *what* students should think.” Participating in debates is even viewed as a more active and productive form of learning than classroom discussion because of the preparation skills required (Osborne 2005). Employers and alumni both report that developing these critical thinking and communication skills is crucial for success in an era when people so routinely

change jobs and entire fields throughout a career (Combs and Bourne 1994; Kennedy 2007).

However, in-class debates are not without difficulty. A traditional debate format, in which a small group of students is given the task of presenting arguments for or against a particular issue, can promote pro and con dualism that is both incomplete and counter to developing a sociological imagination (Tumposky 2004). Although there are several suggested techniques for addressing this issue (Kennedy 2007), they have not been tested or examined systematically. In this article we describe our efforts to avoid dualism through the development and implementation of a set of

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stakeholder meetings. We first examine the rationale for developing this method and then describe a particular classroom application of this type of debate. Next, we describe our assessment of the exercise both independent of and relative to traditional debates. We conclude by identifying some potential difficulties and make suggestions about the technique's transferability to other academic settings.

IN-CLASS STUDENT DEBATES

The literature surrounding in-class debates has shown that debates accomplish three fundamental tasks in the classroom. First, debates are an active form of learning that fosters both content mastery and higher-order critical thinking skills. The benefits of active learning in general are significant (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006; Prince 2004), and debates are particularly well suited to engaging students with a broad range of learning skills in this process (Kennedy 2007). While several studies confirm the value of debate preparation for reinforcing basic course knowledge (Crone 1997; Lewin and Wakefield 1983), "debates go beyond mastery of the content as students also develop critical thinking skills, such as recognizing inconsistencies and identifying assumptions" (Kennedy 2007:189). The development of such critical thinking skills has long been at the core of liberal education.

Debate preparation and participation requires the skills that form the foundation of both a liberal education in general and sociological education in particular. Osborne (2005) argues that debates help to develop a sense of identity and foster good citizenship by analyzing and developing arguments rather than simply defending beliefs. Additionally, debates allow students the opportunity to develop better oral communication skills that are both increasingly rare and important in both the marketplace and a democratic society (Kennedy 2007). More specifically, debates afford students a structured opportunity for taking the role of the other and developing empathy, both key components of developing a sociological imagination.

Finally, debates represent a welcome change to the normal classroom routine that helps keep both students and instructors engaged throughout the semester. Students and faculty alike report burn-out and frustration, what Crone (1997:214) refers

to as "course fatigue," when classroom activities become too predictable and mundane. In these situations, learning decreases regardless of the quality of the lecture (Middendorf and Kalish 1997). In-class debates can be a useful and enjoyable way to break the routine of lecture and discussion not only because students report enjoying the experience, but also because it results in a more motivated learner (Crone 1997; Osborne 2005).

Debates, especially as they are traditionally configured, are not without problems, however. Most significantly, Tumplosky (2004) argues that the tendency of debates to reinforce students' inclinations toward dichotomous this-or-that reasoning obscures other viewpoints. For example, a traditional debate about the use of corporal punishment in schools allows for only two viewpoints to be presented—those in favor of corporal punishment and those against—which nullifies the existence of mitigating contextual circumstances and glosses over differences. In the corporal punishment example, for instance, the traditional debate suggests that all people who advocate for allowing corporal punishment do so for the same reasons and suggests that those who oppose are of a similarly singular mind-set. Promoting dualism runs counter to the project the sociology instructor is engaged in, namely, getting students to understand the complexity of social life.

The range of potential solutions for the issues is substantial (Kennedy 2007). Most pertinent for this article, stakeholder meetings, also known as role-play debates, involve multiple students who represent different stakeholders for a given issue (Hopkins 2003). A debate, or town meeting, about corporal punishment in schools might include such stakeholders as a principal, a parent, and a representative from the ACLU. Stakeholder meetings have the benefit of including multiple perspectives, which helps to avoid the debate slipping into a simple "for" or "against" resolution. It more accurately represents the complexity of social forces at work in a given situation. Additionally, stakeholder meetings force participants to engage with perspectives that are not their own, a crucial component for a successful in-class debate (Budesheim and Lundquist 2000). Even if the student agrees with the position of the stakeholder, it is highly unlikely that he or she will have considered the position from that perspective beforehand. In other words, stakeholder meetings encourage and reward students for engaging in what Guilford (1967) terms divergent production

as opposed to the convergent production necessitated by traditional debates. That is, students are required to seek multiple solutions to a problem rather than attempting to uncover the single, best solution. This is, of course, in line with the goal of developing a sociological imagination as stated previously.

METHOD

Prior to the first day of class, we deliberate about the number of town meetings we can have and what topics would be covered. For this particular course, 35 students were preregistered, so we settled on seven town meetings with five panelists, or stakeholders, in each meeting. We then picked the following education controversies: standardized testing, affirmative action in higher education admissions, uncredentialed teachers and Teach for America, corporal punishment in schools, athletic scholarships, diversity and single-sex/historically black colleges, and sex education. We crafted a description of each town meeting that involved an invitation from a school district, legislature, or college board of trust to help them understand the various sides of a controversial proposal. The descriptions are often based on real-life events, but we occasionally create a controversial scenario from scratch. Then we set out to write 35 character profiles (see Appendix A for examples of town meeting descriptions and characters). This preparation for the meetings usually takes about 10 to 12 hours, with the bulk of that time spent researching and then creating the character profiles.

Students are assigned stakeholder-characters rather than simply pro/con positions and must portray those characters convincingly. This format creates much more tension, much more interest from students watching the debates, and a more sophisticated set of arguments than we've gotten when we simply assigned students a pro/con perspective. Each town meeting panel is balanced with two scholars whose work informs either the pro or con side of the controversy and two stakeholders whose work/lives would be affected by the outcome of the meeting. The fifth participant in the five-student panels is a "famous wildcard," usually a notable figure from politics or entertainment (e.g., Hillary Clinton), a historical or fictional character (e.g., Carl Brigham, the "father of the SAT"), or a notable member of our own college community. The wildcard is often the most fun and most challenging character for students to play because they and the

audience are usually familiar with the character's personality, but not always familiar with their perspective. These characters either had nuanced "gray" positions on the issues, or in those debates where the audience was likely to have a clear opinion on an issue, they voiced the position that was contrary to the audience's. Students assigned to be nonscholars tend to find their assignment more difficult because they often have to pull together more resources than students portraying people with multiple manuscripts that speak to the issue. While each meeting could have as few as three panelists, we have found that it is better to have five in those inevitable cases when students are ill on the day of their presentation. Having only three or four remaining panelists still allows the meeting to represent a diverse slate of perspectives and experiences; two panelists could not do that.

Once the class roster has settled and the instructors are familiar with the students, we assign students to meeting dates and characters. In our first attempts at these town meetings, students were assigned randomly to their roles. After reviewing course evaluations, we noticed that students were consistently stating that "being forced to accurately and convincingly argue for a position that is not your own (and that might be very far from your own position) was an interesting intellectual exercise that forces me to think outside the box." This led us to start assigning some portion of the students to roles that differed from their own opinions. We accomplished this by having students fill out an in-class "welcome" survey that asks for basic administrative information (e.g., preferred e-mail) and also asks to what degree they agree with 15 statements about education; 7 of those statements are drawn from the town meeting themes. While this approach often did not affect the audience's response to the panel, there were strikingly engaging interactions between the audience and the panelist when they knew that the student portraying the stakeholder was clearly playing against type. For example, one of our best-known football players was assigned to be an opponent of college athletics. Matching students to panels takes about two hours. In those cases where students do not hold clear opposing opinions, we randomly assign them to a meeting.

Students are encouraged, and in some cases explicitly told, to contact the person they are portraying as they create their character for the town meeting. They are also told to research either the

stakeholders' writings on the issue or similar stakeholders'/scholars' books and articles in order to strengthen their arguments. Usually, there is very little discussion between panelists and instructors before the meetings. Students are free to meet with us about their argument and even the possible arguments likely to come from other panelists. When these meetings take place, students are often looking for leads, that is, one or two sources that they can use to jumpstart their search for further information. These rare meetings are almost always initiated by students who are assigned the slightly more difficult "non-scholar" stakeholders.

The meetings are scheduled for Fridays in the last 8 to 10 weeks of the semester. Having the meetings later in the semester gives students time to prepare their arguments and gives us the ability to schedule the meetings during weeks when the course lectures might inform the audience's broad understanding of the sociological issues underlying the town meeting's question. Having them this late also gives the first set of panelists nearly 7 weeks to prepare for their meeting. On the day of the meeting, the five panelists gather at the front of the room in front of a display that announces the meeting's question and lists each panelist so the audience can refer to each presenter by their character's name. A perennial, but easily overcome, challenge is room arrangement. Because presenters speak in a panel format, the room must be arranged in a way that allows them to be seated in full view of the audience. Usually, we request theater-style or otherwise tiered classrooms. When these are not available, we arrange the room on each meeting day to approximate a stage-like performance space. This arrangement not only helps to set up the expected social dynamic for the presentations but also provides an opportunity for us to reinforce earlier lessons about dramaturgy and impression management (Goffman 1959). In fact, we explicitly address Goffman's (1959) theory of social interaction as managed and constructed by both the performer and the audience early in the semester so that students will be familiar with it prior to the stakeholder meetings.

As part of their performance, students often come in costume, either dressed in business attire or with other props such as clerical collars or maternity clothes with a "baby bump." This level of performance is not an explicit requirement, but it enhances the persistent and believable portrayal

of their stakeholder. We introduce the town meeting and then each panelist introduces himself or herself, in character, with a 2-minute statement about what they expect to contribute to the meeting. We then give them 15 minutes to expound on their argument or ask questions of the other panelists. In the next 15 minutes, the moderator(s) join the debate, asking clarifying questions and pushing panelists to respond to each others' critiques of their positions. Occasionally, we use this time to give less aggressive panelists an opportunity to contribute to the conversation by asking them direct questions about their perspective. In the remaining 15 minutes, we open the floor for audience members to ask questions of the panel or to make their own short statements about the topic. The audience understands the requirement that panelists stay in character, so they facilitate this by calling the students by their characters' names with any necessary appellation like "Dr." or "Senator." The meeting ends with the audience applauding the panelists and a reminder by the moderator(s) that the students were "playing roles and should not be assumed to hold any of the opinions they expressed." This final reminder is necessary because in some town meetings, portrayals are so convincing that they have the potential to create problems for the students once they leave the classroom.

Each panelist is required to write an eight-page persuasive essay, written in character, that undergirds their performance in the debate. The paper helps students organize their thoughts and gives us some confidence that students' arguments in the meeting are not simply extemporaneous responses. Students turn in a rough draft at the start of the meeting and then have until the next day to send us a final draft, which includes, as necessary, any responses to some of the critiques of their argument made by other panelists, the moderator(s), or audience members.

GRADING

The student presenters are graded on two components: the persuasive essay, which is graded by the lead teacher, and their performance in the town meeting, which is graded by the other students and the teaching assistant.

The papers are evaluated using the kind of criteria one would use to evaluate any persuasive paper: how strongly does the student establish any facts that would support his or her argument;

does the student successfully attempt to address and counter opponents' possible arguments; is the argument competently organized and easy to follow; are references used appropriately and at the level required by the assignment; and is the paper free of spelling, typographical, and grammatical errors. Some portion of the evaluation is based on how much their argument reflects the "voice" and personality of their character. Students are encouraged to use personal pronouns and to cite "themselves" (e.g., "In my book . . .") whenever appropriate. The paper must include a minimum of five sources from the course readings or some other academic (non-Web site) source. The paper grade accounts for 50 percent of the final town meeting grade.

Because town meetings are not intended solely as a learning opportunity for the students assigned to them, we make it clear to presenters that ultimately, they are accountable to the other students in the class. In order to formalize that relationship, we have the class evaluate each presenter's presentation and the overall meeting. In order to receive extra credit points in the class, the panelists and other students are invited to complete a Web survey (see Appendix B) that asks them to evaluate the students on the following five variables, measured with five-item Likert scales: how prepared were they to take on their role—did they seem to know what they were talking about; how persuasive was their argument; how much did their argument reflect knowledge of what the literature might say about their perspective; how well did they stay in character and present a consistent, accurate portrayal of their role; and how much time do you think they spent on their presentation. They also must offer written comments to at least three of the presenters. For this application of the exercise, the average number of evaluations submitted by each student was four (out of seven) and an average of 64 percent of the students evaluated each town meeting, with a high of 91 percent for the last town meeting and a low of 44 percent for the second one.

We calculate an average for each of the five variables and assign the panelists the summed total of those five scores. While there are invariably those evaluators who give every presenter a high score on each evaluation point, this is a rare exception. Student evaluations of the panelist are always very close to the instructors' evaluations (we fill out the instrument as well), suggesting that students are honest and critical

in their assessments of other students' work. The average grade across the semester's town meeting performances was an 86 out of a possible 100 points. These evaluations account for the remaining half of the town meeting grade.

Each panelist is given a personalized grading sheet that lists her or his grade on the paper, the student's grade on the town meeting performance, and a complete listing of all of the audience's anonymous written comments, the average number of which is about 15 for each panelist.

EVALUATION

Taking Sides, a popular book series published by McGraw-Hill, offers a text-based version of the kind of dualistic thinking we try to undo with this exercise. These 32 volumes cover "clashing views on controversial issues" in a number of disciplines ranging from abnormal psychology to world politics. In each volume, students are offered 18 to 20 fairly complex propositions that are then "debated" in dualistic fashion with two scholars or commentators being engaged to either agree or disagree with each proposition's position. While each debate is followed by a postscript that points students toward additional readings and other possible viewpoints, little work is done in each book to flesh out those other viewpoints at the same level the two primary "yes" and "no" viewpoints are.

Before we settled on the stakeholder meeting format to teach these issues, the lead author used the "Educational Issues" text edited by James Noll (2003). In a debate format, students were assigned to argue the two positions offered in the main text of each chapter. Our experience with the pro/con approach offered by the series was, in fact, the catalyst that drove us to rethink how these debates were structured. Inevitably, during the question-and-answer sessions of each *Taking Sides* debate, the student presenters were asked multiple "what about this" questions that reflected the kind of lived experience with these controversial issues that our stakeholder approach seeks to remedy. Because the two panelists only had a scholarly pro-con positioning to draw on, they rarely gave much thought to the more nuanced responses that a person wrestling with those concerns in "real life" might bring to bear in a discussion of these issues. As a result, they were almost always caught off guard by the Q&A period no matter how many times we would

encourage them to be more critical of their own arguments in advance. The persuasive essays were similarly one-dimensional, reflecting only the voices of the *Taking Sides* scholars or other scholarship supporting those opinions. It was clear that panelists understood the fundamental arguments for/against the issue, but there was little evidence that the intellectual distance between students and these issues was consistently breached.

In comparing the two approaches, it has become quite clear that the stakeholder meetings do a better job of producing the kind of critical engagement with the material that is at the heart of the exercise. In our instructions, we remind students that the opposing panelists will not simply represent the “opposite” position but in fact might represent a position that could support their own if the conditions were different. For example, in the debate on school vouchers, the separation-of-church-and-state panelist could find agreement with the pro-vouchers panelist if the pro-vouchers panelist came prepared to consider excluding religious schools from their proposal. Each panelist knows who the stakeholders are who will join them in the meeting. Students who do well on the assignment take advantage of that knowledge and craft arguments—both in their persuasive essay and in their in-class performance—that respond to the multidimensional perspectives represented by the other panelists. A tactic used quite effectively by these students is arguing with other panelists by using their own words against them. For example, a student arguing against Teach for America would bring up panelist Wendy Kopp’s book (see Appendix) and then use opposing evidence to weaken “Kopp’s” case. This was virtually impossible in our *Taking Sides* debates because the panelists were representing dualistic positions rather than more nuanced personal perspectives.

Relative to the essays written for our *Taking Sides* debates, stakeholder-meeting papers are longer, more rich in their use of data to support a position, and more likely to have paragraphs that begin with the words “detractors of my position might argue.” Even more impressively, most of these papers include at least one book or article written by another panelist as a source. In addition, because some of the stakeholders aren’t academics, we were more likely to encounter the kind of appeals to one’s emotions (e.g., using personal examples) that are often stripped from academic

writing.¹ These differences are not merely the result of an increase in the number of perspectives in stakeholder meetings relative to the previously used *Taking Sides* debates. The difference in outcome reflects the additional necessity for each panelist to be prepared for and to offer logic-based arguments (e.g., those coming from a corporal punishment expert), emotional arguments (e.g., those coming from a mother whose son’s tooth was knocked out by an angry teacher), and arguments complicated by conditions (e.g., that spanking has a less negative psychological impact on black children than on white ones). These presentations and papers, unlike those from the *Taking Sides* debates, were consistently more comprehensive in their examination of these issues as students prepared themselves not only to respond to the black-and-white “yes” and “no” but also to the more gray “maybe” and “in these situations” that make all of these issues so difficult to resolve.

DISCUSSION AND CHALLENGES

These stakeholder panels are used in classes ranging from sociology of religion to sociology of the family, from race and ethnicity to gender and sexuality. The exercise can be useful in any class in which there are controversies and has been used in courses with anywhere from 10 students to 60 students. As long as each town meeting contains four to five panelists, the number of students in the course is irrelevant. Students in these courses range from first-years to graduating seniors. The example described in this article is based on the town meetings from the lead author’s upper-level Sociology of Education course. The course does not have prerequisites and is not a major requirement, so students may not have had several prior courses in sociology. No stakeholder character required an extensive knowledge of the sociology literature, so the third of the students who weren’t sociology majors were not at a disadvantage. In fact, any sociological knowledge that a character displayed had to be tied to their character’s own study of the literature, rather than expressed as something the student learned in our or another professor’s course. For example, if a student portraying Hillary Clinton stated, “as we learned in class,” this would be treated as a break in her character and the student’s grade would reflect the break.

We use town meetings in all of our Monday, Wednesday, Friday lecture courses because the

exercise fits well with the 50-minute class period; there are usually 45 class periods so using 7 or 8 still allows us to cover the rest of the course material. While the exercise could be used occasionally in the Tuesday/Thursday 75-minute course, ensuring that panels remained at five students would usually require us to use up more than a quarter of the class periods on town meetings. As the meetings are intended as extensions of what is covered in the lectures, we could not comprehensively cover the core material in the remaining class sessions.

Dundes (2001), who also does multiple debates throughout the semester, raises some concern about devoting so much class time to debates, but found that students responded positively on the course evaluations and that the instructor did not perceive any weariness on the part of the students “because the topics, speakers, and audience configuration were always something different” (Dundes 2001:241). In other words, the variety made the debates a welcome change throughout the semester rather than something tedious and mundane. This is a particular strength of the stakeholder meetings as well. Not only do the topics change, but the roles of the speakers change as well. There are not simply pro and con, for and against positions. Instead, a good deal of effort goes into selecting stakeholders with multiple, and sometimes contradictory, interests in a given topic. This makes it difficult for students in the audience to try to discern beforehand what position a presenter might take for his or her character. Intentionally introducing this level of ambiguity also forces student presenters to evaluate arguments from multiple sides in formulating their character’s position and justify the position they finally settle on.

Any problems we have encountered have tended toward the logistical or mechanical. We’ve learned in early attempts at this exercise how to manage them in advance. Students often initially confuse their assignment as one that requires them to research their character and come prepared with an extensive sense of the person’s biography. This is easily corrected by making clear the distinction between the character and the issue. That is, once a student has a general sense of the stance of a particular character, then he or she must do research to support that viewpoint. This tendency to focus on the character led some students to use their two-minute introduction to talk about who they were. We have since learned to remind students that this

introduction was the only opportunity they’d have to present their case uninterrupted. They should use that moment wisely.

Another tendency that students have is to use much of their time in the meeting asking questions of other panelists. When describing the town meeting format, we inform them that unless they’re prepared for the other person’s answer, questions give their opponents an opportunity to state their case more clearly. We advise students to offer a mix of questions and definitive statements to ensure that they are able to get their own argument out.

As with any classroom experience that depends heavily on student participation as its driver, one of the risks with this exercise is that a student will either not be present in their meeting or will be unprepared to fully represent their stakeholder’s perspective. As we mentioned earlier, having five student panelists ensures that we still have some breadth in the perspectives represented on the panel if one of the presenters is absent. In our experience, there are always at least three clear perspectives represented on each panel. This is partly a function of the care we take in composing a diverse slate of panelists. In those instances when a student is present but ill prepared for the panel, we find that the student sticks to one or two clear talking points that are repeated whenever challenged. These students are also more likely to rely on note cards or to disengage from more combative discussions. Students know that displays of incompetence will be evaluated negatively; they inevitably come up with strategies to hide such deficiencies.

Finally, this format is new for nearly all students, and so we do significant prep work (e.g., stating that students should have fun with their performance and “ham it up”) in class to alleviate anxiety prior to the first town meeting. In addition, we try to assign one or two veteran town meeting panelists who have participated in other courses to the first town meeting as models. After viewing the first meeting, students’ fears subside significantly.

While this assignment is primarily concerned with assessing each panelist’s knowledge of the issue they’re discussing and the critical thinking skills they’ve applied to their argument, we also hope that students in the audience will learn something from each meeting. One of the ways we encourage both audience understanding of the issue and engagement in the debate is by placing each town meeting proximate to lectures that are

relevant to the meeting. The stakeholder meeting tends to serve as a weekly capstone to class lectures that might inform the panelists' discussion. For example, the panel discussing corporal punishment was preceded by lectures and readings concerning school discipline and adolescent subcultures. An additional reading is assigned on the day of the town meeting that exemplifies the issue without offering one of the perspectives represented by the panelists. In addition to giving us an informed audience, these resources give the audience the tools to challenge the perspectives expressed by each panelist. Their interactions with the panel, particularly critiques of their statements, add another opportunity for panelists' understanding of their issue to be broadened. In a way, our audience helps us meet the objectives of the exercise and is therefore an indispensable part of the town meeting experience.

CONCLUSION

Compared to the usual pro-con debates we once used, stakeholder meetings enhance the audience's interest and, consequently, seem to have a higher level of participation from them. At the point when the moderator allows audience questions, hands pop up all over the auditorium. While it is rare an audience member to add to the debate with a statement, their questions, which are usually confrontational in tone, add depth to the debate by forcing the stakeholders to further defend their perspective in ways that spark more questions from other audience members.

Students informally evaluate the town meetings in their comments on the end-of-semester course evaluations. Of all of the course's assignments, the town meeting is the one most frequently listed and most positively evaluated. In addition to comments about the value of having to understand a perspective different from their own, other students "thought the town meetings were very informative, especially because of the types of research required for their completion." While we hope that students will master everything taught in the course, we were glad that a primary goal of the assignment was expressed so often in comments such as "I liked the town meetings because they allowed each student to really engage one topic in depth and become an 'expert' in something."

In short, stakeholder town meetings as we have described them have many benefits, not the least

of which is that they help expose students to the complexity of social life. The overall benefit of these debates is derived more from students grasping this overall concept than from the particulars of any given issue. The ability to understand issues from a variety of competing perspectives is a fundamental component of a sociological imagination. These stakeholder meetings have been a useful tool in helping us reinforce this concept throughout the semester in a way that is informative, accessible, and engaging for our students.

APPENDIX A

Sample Town Meeting Theme Descriptions and Characters²

- Recently, many states have begun using uncertified teachers as a way of staffing classrooms and cutting budgets. But while programs like Teach for America (TFA) are an effective way of finding teachers for undesirable positions, critics claim that the substandard teaching widens the gap between poor, often minority, students and wealthier students. Is TFA a program that offers a solution to a problem, or is it a misguided, albeit noble, attempt to cover up a growing inequity? Birmingham, the capital city of a state that ranks 47th in spending on their students, is considering using Teach for America teachers in their school district. They've asked us to convene a panel to discuss the issue: a recent college grad who double-majored in education and English in order to teach back home in Georgia; a parent of a child who has had Teach for America teachers for fourth through sixth grades; the principal of Philadelphia's Simon Gratz High School who is considering using TFA teachers; David Berliner, a professor and educational psychologist at the Arizona State University; and Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America and author of "One Day, All Children."
- Our state is one of the few that still use corporal punishment (spanking) as a low-level response to student misbehavior in the

- schools. Students who misbehave are first given a written assignment. On the second infraction, they are paddled, usually with an open hand, paddle, or ruler, depending on the age of the child. Last year, Metro was sued because a child was paddled for stealing candy from another student. The school district won the case, but this prompted a local parents' group to demand an end to corporal punishment in Metro schools. We have asked six members of our state community to come and speak about this issue: a single mother who sued the Sierra Vista (AZ) school district last year for a teacher knocking a tooth from her son's mouth; the President of the NAACP chapter in Biloxi, Mississippi; a principal in a Los Angeles area high school; a psychologist from the American Academy of Pediatrics; and Richard Pitt, coauthor of "Judging School Discipline."
- The university and its professional schools have given certain admission privileges to women and minority candidates as part of conscious affirmative action policy. This affirmative action policy has come under fire by certain groups, especially as the Latino and Asian populations have grown steadily. In 1990, UA was 10 percent minority. Now, minorities make up 23 percent of the school population with Latinos at 13 percent and Asians at 5 percent. A measure to repeal affirmative action admission policies has been placed on the ballot and will be voted on by Arizona citizens next month. We have been asked to convene a panel to advise the Arizona regents on this issue: the student founder of Fighting Against Inequality in Recruitment and Admission (FAIR); a white student who was denied admission to the law school last year; Derek Bok, coauthor of "The Shape of the River;" a conservative senator who sees discrimination at the college level as an issue of the past; and the University of Tennessee's Coordinator of Multicultural Recruitment and Admission.

- Historically black colleges and universities have long been a place, like same-sex colleges, where students could obtain an education that celebrates rather than ignores their culture and identity. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, these institutions are increasingly coming under fire for being a barrier to an integrated society that values the opinions of all its members regardless of race or sex. As such, a bill is being debated in Congress that will bar all federal funding, including financial aid for students and grants for faculty research, for these schools. We have convened a panel to discuss this pending policy: Patricia Gurin, author of "The Compelling Need for Diversity in Education"; Bryan Townsend, a male student at the Citadel, the previously all-male military academy; Karen Kristof, an alumna of and associate director of admission at Smith College; Serbrenia J. Sims, author of "Diversifying Historically Black Colleges and Universities"; and Beverly Daniel Tatum, the president of Spelman College in Atlanta.

APPENDIX B

Abbreviated Version of Town Meeting Performance Evaluation Sheet

Because town meetings are not intended solely as a learning opportunity for the people assigned to them, it is important that presenters remember that they are accountable to you, the other students in the class. Please evaluate each presenters' presentation and the overall meeting. In order to receive one extra credit point, you have to complete the top checkbox portion of the form. If you want to receive two extra credit points, you must give written comments to at least three of the presenters.

These forms must be completed by noon on the Saturday after the town meeting being evaluated. I will consider these comments when I grade the presenters and they will receive an anonymous summary of your comments with their grade.

	LOW	----->			HIGH
How prepared were they to take on their role? Did they seem to know what they were talking about?	Homer Simpson	Maggie Simpson	Bart Simpson	Marge Simpson	Lisa Simpson
Panelist Name: Hillary Clinton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How persuasive was their argument?	Not At All	Just Barely Got Me Thinking	Pretty Good, But Average	Almost Got Me There	I Totally Bought It
Panelist Name: Hillary Clinton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How much did their argument reflect knowledge of what the literature might say about their perspective?	Duh . . What's A Major	Basket Weaving Major	Psychology Major	Sociology Major	An "A" Student In This Class
Panelist Name: Hillary Clinton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How well did they stay in character and present a consistent, accurate portrayal of their role?	Paris Hilton	Keanu Reeves	Johnny Depp	Angelina Jolie	Tom Hanks
Panelist Name: Hillary Clinton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How much time do you think they spent on their town meeting presentation?	They knew they were on today?	About a half an hour	Probably an hour or so	More than one sitting, probably	A lot of time
Panelist Name: Hillary Clinton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you have any additional comments for each presenter? Remember, in order to receive the extra credit points, you must offer MEANINGFUL comments to at least THREE presenters.

Panelist Name: Hillary Clinton

NOTES

The authors wish to thank Liz Grauerholz and the three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful insights in the development of this article.

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1. We examined two sets of 10 papers (2 each from 5 similar *Taking Sides* and stakeholder meetings) and these differences were immediately noticeable and stark. While there was some variability in the organization

- and comprehensiveness of both *Taking Sides* debate and stakeholder meeting essays, the differences elucidated here were clear in 7 of the 10 cases. It is certainly not the case that every stakeholder meeting essay was better than its *Taking Sides* twin, but the majority of them were more likely to have these characteristics.
2. Other descriptions and more detailed character profiles are available by request from the authors. These are available for courses in Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, Sociology of Religion, Sociology of Gender, and this course in Sociology of Education.

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BIOS

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