

## NEIU Philosophy Ethics Bowl Team 5<sup>th</sup> in the Nation!



The story of NEIU's Philosophy Ethics Bowl Team winning first the regional and then taking 5<sup>th</sup> in the national championship almost reads like a made-for-TV movie. In this corner, we have the underdogs from a Master's level state university of modest resources, and in that corner we have scores of students from top-tier research institutions such as Loyola, IU-Bloomington, UNC-Chapel Hill, Clemson, Dartmouth, the Naval Academy, among others. We have a small group of student volunteers pitted against teams that had extensive pre-trials at their institution to select the individuals who would compete. We have a tired team of contestants that had already checked out of the hotel and then had to camp out in the lobby to recuperate for the final round, in which they hadn't counted to participate. But those are just details. The *real* story, however, is how faculty and students from a small program at Northeastern have come together to create a great learning experience while, along the way, accomplishing remarkable academic feats far from home.

We sat down with the two coaches of the team, Prof. Dan Milsky and Prof. John Casey, from the Philosophy Department, and asked them about what they did and why it worked. Here is a brief summary of their comments.

### *How did you recruit and coach your students for this competition?*

Other institutions started with internal competitions and then selected their team from the winners, but we opened it up to everybody, using word of mouth, our listserv, and in-class announcements, and then we went with those students who volunteered. It helps that the Philosophy students are a tightly-knit community, and we see them frequently throughout the week. We ended up with a traveling team of five, and three additional team members who practiced with the others at home. Reasoning through the various ethics cases together took quite some time. Getting ready for the competition took about eight weeks, with a couple of hours per week at first, five to six hours in each of the last three weeks, and a couple of long marathon sessions at Dr. Milsky's house. It wasn't always easy to find times during which all participants could make it, but everybody was really dedicated.

### ***How does this fit with your regular teaching?***

Dr. Milsky teaches ethics classes. Integrating realistic cases (often directly out of the day's newspapers) into his classes is natural. He has used Bowl team members as group leaders in his classes to have little mock competitions and help students follow the Bowl procedures. It's a fun and engaging activity for the students, who tend to enjoy it. Dr. Casey also finds it easy to include Ethics Bowl practice in his teaching. He teaches critical thinking courses, so applied critical thinking activities work well in his classes. Skillful Ethics Bowl contestants need to be able to construct logical arguments and uncover fallacies in the opponents' line of reasoning. Both faculty also recognize how the Bowl has changed their relationship with students. Acting as coaches (rather than "professors") creates informal connections with students that make classes all the more pleasant. Both faculty can frequently be seen in engaged conversations with their students in the cafeteria or elsewhere on campus. It has created a sense of community that, if anything, has raised academic standards because coaches have more credibility than anybody to be demanding of their charges. This esprit de corps also seems to have benefitted the program: Philosophy majors have increased from 12 to 60 in the last five or six years.

### ***Would this approach work for other departments?***

Some faculty in Political Science take a similar approach. They have students debate legal cases in a Model United Nations or a Moot Court and in front of sitting judges in Springfield. The idea is the same: Make it realistic, take it outside of the classroom, have others judge the students' performance, and have fun with it. As John Casey says: "It's teaching without grades" or having "a reading group without a book." And what do the faculty get out of it? "It's the singularly most satisfying experience I have ever had as a professor," says Milsky.

### ***Why did NEIU students do so much better than many expected?***

Many of the students from the prestige institutions in the competition are traditional-age students in their late teens/early twenties. They can make a logical argument, maybe dazzle with their rhetorical skills, but they don't really feel the application of the cases they are discussing. Here is where NEIU students' diversity shows itself as a strength. NEIU team members were somewhat older than students on the other teams. They have life experience. There were two single parents in the group and a former soldier with leadership experience. One of the students had joined the group partially to overcome a speech impediment, and that required courage. The students were not coached to "win." Their practice sessions challenged them to explore all different perspectives on a case. They were trying to develop nuance and, of course, they had the advantage of often speaking from experience.

### ***Why are students attracted to Philosophy at this day and age?***

Part of this is speculation, although Nick Jolly in the *New York Times* about a year ago explained increasing numbers of philosophy majors across the country with students' confusion about the types of jobs associated with any number of academic fields. While philosophy may not have a specific career goal (unless one wants to teach philosophy), the skills and intellectual qualities it fosters are quite obvious. Students understand that the development of critical thinking and good writing skills are definite assets of a philosophy degree. Law schools have become very interested in students with a B.A. in philosophy, and increasing numbers of NEIU philosophy students are making it into graduate school. The sense of community in the department and the close relationships with professors are another selling point that has not gone unnoticed by students choosing a major.