August 6, 2012

Department Chair:

I write to urge you to consider sponsoring a local High School Ethics Bowl in your area. My experience with the Ethics Bowl has convinced me that it’s a good thing to do. Sponsoring an Ethics Bowl has brought our department significant benefits at no significant cost. As an outreach event, it generated visibility and support for philosophy within the community, reaching high school teachers and administrators as well as parents of high school students. It provided our graduate students with an important service learning opportunity. And it helped to generate interest in our classes among incoming undergrads, since many Ethics Bowl participants eventually enrolled in UT. Finally, of course, we believe that it has made a contribution to the moral and intellectual development of all the high school students who participate, not least by virtue of the months they spend with their local coaches preparing.

In the Spring of 2009, Matt Deaton, then one of our graduate students, approached me about sponsoring a local high school Ethics Bowl that he was interested in establishing. As I recall, I offered him the use of the Philosophy Department’s name as a sponsor and “permission” to recruit some of his fellow graduate students to serve as coaches for local high schools interested in fielding a team. I also offered a nominal sum – perhaps $200 – with which to purchase prizes for winning teams. Matt and several other graduate students did all the work; two or three faculty volunteered one evening to serve as judges for the event. Matt didn’t ask for much; I certainly didn’t give him much. He did all the organizational work. It was a no-brainer.

Starting from rather modest beginnings the first year – from two, to four, and last year expanding to six teams – the High School Ethics Bowl in Knoxville has grown steadily without additional effort or increased funding from Philosophy. In fact, in some ways there is less time and effort contributed now by the department, as schools who have participated regularly have developed their own faculty to serve as coaches and other sponsors have been recruited to provide the small amount of financing this event needs.

The success of the Bowl has drawn the attention and support of the College of Arts and Sciences, which rightly views the Ethics Bowl as a natural companion to its already successful High School Science Olympiad and High School Math Contest.
In my experience, the High School Ethics Bowl has been a very good thing for the participants and for the families that attend the bowl competition, for the High Schools that field teams, for the UT Philosophy Department, for the College of Arts and Sciences at UT, and indeed for UT more generally. I expect that your experience will be the same. I urge you to give it a try!

Sincerely yours,

John Hardwig,
Professor Emeritus &
Former Department Head
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