

The Public Square:

A VA250/Braver Angels Debate Initiative

As part of VA250's commemorations of U.S. independence, Public Square debates bring together students from high schools, 2-year and 4-year colleges, and members of the broader community for a respectful exchange of ideas on timely civic questions. Using the Braver Angels debate format, these events invite diverse voices into a shared space—where the goal isn't to win, but to understand. Public Square debates help participants explore what it means to live in a democracy—and what it takes to strengthen one. We are currently seeking hosts to organize regional Public Square events in the 2025-2026 academic year. **Contact Jodi Fisler at jfisler@braverangels.org to learn more or to confirm your intent to host.**



● What is a Braver Angels debate?

Developed by Braver Angels, a national nonprofit dedicated to reducing political polarization in the United States, Braver Angels debates are non-competitive and invite participation by all attendees. They use a light parliamentary format, led by a chair, to engage attendees in a respectful exchange of ideas, where understanding—not winning—is the goal. This 5-minute video explains the format as it has been used on college campuses nationwide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLsVVEmR8ro>

● How big is a debate, and how long does it last?

Braver Angels debates can involve anywhere from 30-100 or more people. Public Square debates may range in size, but they should be reasonably balanced among the participant categories (i.e., high school/college students and community members). The Public Square debates will run for about 2 hours.

● What would be involved in organizing a Public Square event?

1. Identify partners. Hosts need to identify partners from the other groups. A 4-year college, for example, would need to find partners at both a high school and a 2-year college who will commit to getting students out to the debate. Collaboration among multiple colleges and high schools (public and private) is welcome and encouraged. Members of the local community (e.g., parents, members of civic organizations, local public officials) should also be involved. SCHEV and the VDOE can assist with identifying partners, if needed.

2. Notify us. Once you inform us of your intent to hold a debate, we will connect you with someone from the Braver Angels National Debates Team and/or the College Debates & Discourse Alliance. We will also send you the VA250 Toolkit with logos, branding guidelines, and social media resources for event promotion.

3. Pick a date. Public Square debates should be held during the 2025-26 academic year. The exact timing is up to the partnering organizations, based on academic schedules, space availability, and other local considerations. Unless otherwise agreed upon, Braver Angels and the College Debates & Discourse Alliance will provide a trained chair to lead the events (at no cost), so they should be consulted before a date is finalized.

4. Select a resolution. Braver Angels and/or the College Debates & Discourse Alliance can advise the partners about how to select a resolution from this list:

- **Resolved: The American Dream is alive and well.**
- **Resolved: Social media is a threat to democracy.**
- **Resolved: Proof of citizenship should be required to vote.**
- **Resolved: Virginia should guarantee Universal Basic Income.**

These resolutions were developed specifically for the Public Square initiative by faculty, staff and students from Virginia colleges, with guidance from Braver Angels staff. They invite participants to explore timely issues while also addressing enduring themes in U.S. history, such as what it takes to form “a more perfect union” and how we ensure “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

5. Submit the paperwork. One of the partner institutions (college, school, or other hosting organization) must submit a VA250 partnership application and licensing agreement. This is largely a formality to ensure that VA250 logos are used appropriately.

6. Get ready! If you are an educator, you can prepare students to debate the selected resolution by having them research different perspectives and find sources of evidence to help them form and defend their own opinion. You can also introduce students to the Braver Angels debate format through classroom or campus debates on other topics. The College Debates & Discourse Alliance has a curricular toolkit with sample assignments, which can be adapted easily to a high school context. Faculty/Staff can learn how to chair debates themselves through a no-cost one-hour online training program.

● **What does it cost to host?**

There are no fixed costs for hosting a debate. Trained chairs can be provided by the College Debates & Discourse Alliance at no cost, or a teacher/faculty member can complete an online training to chair a debate (also at no cost). Costs may be incurred for space, set-up, transportation and parking, depending on the policies of the hosting institution and their partners. Hosts may also consider providing refreshments. Partners can determine amongst themselves how to share costs.

● **What distinguishes a Public Square event from other Braver Angels debates?**

Public Square debates are distinct from regular Braver Angels debates in three ways: timing, topics, and participants.

Timing. The debates will take place during the 2025-2026 academic year.

Topics. The debates will be on one of the four pre-selected resolutions.

Participants. The debates will bring together four different groups: (1) students and faculty/staff from public or private 4-year colleges and universities; (2) 2-year college students and faculty/staff; (3) high school students and faculty/staff; and (4) community members. Although Braver Angels community debates are always open to diverse participants, Public Square debates set the expectation that all four groups will be involved.

Furthermore, students from colleges and schools participating in Public Square debates will be invited to participate in a culminating state-wide debate in the State Capitol in October 2026. (Space is limited.)

● What are the learning outcomes for students?

Public Square debates support many valuable learning objectives. The extent of students' learning will depend on how much time and effort they spend preparing for the debate. Even with minimal preparation, however, the debate experience can be beneficial to students' cognitive, social, and civic development.

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of key principles of U.S. democracy, including rights, responsibilities, and the role of public discourse in a democratic society.
- Students will evaluate multiple perspectives on issues related to U.S. government and democratic practice.
- Students will construct and articulate evidence-based arguments.
- Students will engage in civil discourse, demonstrating skills in listening, questioning, and respectful disagreement.
- Students will reflect on their own civic beliefs and values.
- Students will demonstrate increased confidence in public speaking, argumentation, and community engagement.

● What do students say about the Braver Angels debate experience?

“I have never in my life been involved in such a thought-provoking discussion, getting to understand the ideas and thoughts of not only other VMI cadets but also students from SVU, Washington and Lee, and Mountain Gateway. Braver Angels has helped me gain a new perspective on discussion and communication in my generation. I got to hear perspectives I would have never thought of. I gained respect for the people who were willing to have a conversation without anger and animosity; it was a pure conversation that was purely educational.”

“I was grateful for the opportunity to speak my mind candidly in an environment where candid opinions were welcomed. During this time of political and ideological polarization in America, we need more events like these! We have the freedom of speech in America, but it hardly serves our society if we do not implement the structure and activities that give people the opportunity to exercise it productively and peacefully.”

“I think it is really important to have a place where you can talk openly and freely and not have reservations about what you are going to say. After seeing some of these debates, how they have gotten off the ground, and some of the things that I've seen said...it's just really cool to see a place where people aren't scared to be 100% truthful and without fear of repercussions of what they're saying.”



● What is VA250?

Established by the General Assembly in 2020, VA250 serves to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, the Revolutionary War, and the Independence of the United States in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Educational institutions at all levels will play a key role in the VA250 Commission's goals to educate Americans about our history; engage with every community to tell a complete story; and inspire people to recommit to the values inherent in citizenship.



ACTA



Braver Angels



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Photo credit: CD&D Alliance

The Public Square Debate initiative is a partnership among VA250, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), Braver Angels, and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), which houses the College Debates & Discourse Alliance.