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Student debate team finishes second at national Ethics Bowl

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In a final matchup of arguments about artificial intelligence and affirmative action, UC Santa Barbara’s student team finished second nationally at the Ethics Bowl — the best showing by any UC school in the 28-year history of the annual event.

“This is the ultimate competition in our field,” said teammember Enri Lala, a second-year history and global studies major and vice president of outreach for [UCSB’s Ethics Bowl Team](#) in the Department of Philosophy. This year, more than 200 schools competed.

Advancing as the dark horse from regional competition with a runner-up finish in California, UCSB was pitted against nearly three dozen teams in Cincinnati for the national event, where teams wrestled with often polarizing issues, from AI and affirmative action to foreign policy, war and biomedical ethics, among others.

Along the way, UCSB dispatched a bevy of longtime favorites, including teams from Yale University, University of Chicago, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and defending champion U.S. Naval Academy. UCSB’s success was a huge

turnaround from last year, when the team failed to make it out of the regionals, Lala noted. He credited team coaches Jon Charry and David King, both of whom are graduate students in philosophy, for their “countless hours giving detailed feedback . . . and encouraging us in every way possible.”

In the final matchup, students discussed what limits ought to be put on AI and who should enforce them. They also argued the moral nuances of commitments made by institutes of higher education to achieve student-body diversity. In the end, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill came out on top. A video of the final is available [here](#).

“The (team’s) performance this year took a lot of people by surprise,” said Charry and King in a joint statement. “No one thought the UCSB team was a joke. But no one thought we were the absolute cream of the crop either. We had seen just how much they had grown and leveled up their game since regionals, and we . . . had no doubt that they could go toe-to-toe with any team in the nation.”

The UCSB Ethics Bowl Team is comprised of undergraduates in a variety of majors: Griffin Baxley (biology); Isabelle Brady (philosophy and English); Chaya Haugland (economics, with minors in philosophy and linguistics); Enri Lala (history and global studies); Natalie Ries (philosophy and sociology) and James Wangjin Xie (philosophy).

The competition is held in conjunction with the annual international conference of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE), a nonprofit founded in 1991 to advance scholarship, education and practice in practical and professional ethics.

“Teams are not assigned pro and con sides of an ethical issue and are not judged by their answers to specific questions but by their ability to identify and analyze the ethical dimensions of each case in a clear, focused and thoughtful manner and with an appreciation for varied perspectives,” according to the APPE.

“In some ways, the conversations during Ethics Bowl rounds are the antithesis of what most of us have come to expect when picturing conversations about really difficult topics,” added Kristen Fuhs Wells, the association’s executive director. “Although the students are dealing with controversial questions and often opposing viewpoints, they listen and empathize. They discuss and reason with each other. They present positions based on just and ethical considerations. I can’t help but

imagine the types of solutions we could come up with if we all practiced the same approach to talking with people about our disagreements.”

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