Issues in medical ethics and biology are among the most controversial in modern society and politics. They involve intense social debate as well as demands for governmental action. Courts, legislatures, governors and Presidents are constantly being bombarded with demands that government take action that satisfies one group or another.

In this course, students will read and discuss two books about controversial bioethics issues — abortion and the right to die — and debate 12 issues selected from a book of debate topics. They include the right to choose abortion, the ethics of surrogate parenting, the future of frozen human embryos, physician assisted suicide, treatment of AIDS patients and many more.

Each class will be divided approximately equally between discussion of the assigned readings and a debate. Students will serve as weekly discussion leaders, will vote on which topics to debate and be given an opportunity to select the topic(s) they are most interested in. The debates will follow a standard format with students participating as debaters and questioners.

The purpose of the course is to have students carefully and critically examine controversial bioethical issues and to develop skills of critical thinking and analysis in looking at controversial social issues. It will be important not only to present opposing views, but to carefully examine the basis for these positions. Information about how government has responded to these issues also is important.

Required Reading:


Required Participation:

1. Participate in weekly discussions and provide questions for the debaters;
2. Serve as weekly discussion leaders on the assigned readings at least once;
3. Serve as the debaters on at least two debate topics.
Require Writing:

1. A four to five page paper in support of the position you take as the debater. Sources for the paper must come from items you have located through library research. They may not come from any of the assigned readings.

2. A weekly list of four questions which you have prepared from the assigned debate reading to ask the debaters (two questions for each side).

Grading and Attendance:

This course is formally pass/fail; however, a minimum passing grade will be the equivalent of "B" work. Attendance is required each week. Grades will be assigned for all aspects of the course: weekly participation in the discussion of assigned readings and questioning of the debaters; debate preparation, discussion leadership, papers written in support of the debate topic and the written list of weekly questions prepared for the debates.

I. Class Schedule

August

31 - Orientation, and voting for debate topics, preferences for discussion leadership and debating.

September

7 - Course Organization and discussion: Ethics, Social Conflict and Public Policy

Read: Levine, Preface (i) and Introduction (xii-xxi);
Glick, Preface (ix-xi) and ch. 2

14 - Context and Rise of the Right to Die

Read: Glick ch. 1 and 3
Debate:

21 - The Right to Die in Three States

Read: Glick, ch. 4
Debate:

28 - The Right to Die in Courts, Legislatures and the National Government

Read: Glick, ch. 5, 6, and 7
Debate:
October

5 - The Early Politics of Abortion
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 1
Debate:

12 - Interest Groups and Abortion
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 2
Debate:

19 - The States and Abortion
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 3
Debate:

26 - Congress and Abortion
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 4
Debate:

November

2 - Abortion and Presidential Politics
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 5
Debate:

9 - Supreme Court and new Abortion Policies
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 6
Debate:

16 - Public Opinion and the new State Politics of Abortion
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 7 and 8
Debate:

23 - No Class

30 - Abortion and National Politics
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 9
Debate:

December

7 - Supreme Court Refines Abortion Policy
Read: Craig and O'Brien, ch. 10
Debate:
II. The Conduct of the Debates

Each person will be the main participant in two debates (two people on each opposing side). Each person may choose 4 or 5 topics of interest and expect to be assigned to their top choices. (There are 20 students for 12 debates, so volunteers to participate in a third debate are welcomed. No formal papers will be required for that third debate participation. See discussion of papers below.)

Every student is required to read the material in the text prior to each debate and come to class prepared to discuss the issues, ask questions, and make position statements.

Debaters for the topic assigned for the day also are expected to do additional library research on the issues and to summarize their arguments in a formal paper with proper citations of references. Students should use no less than 5 references and the papers should be no longer than 4 to 5 double-spaced typed pages. The material contained in the papers will be used for debate presentations, but students are discouraged from reading their papers as their debate presentation. Finished papers are due the same day of the debate. (Debaters for the first two topics will be given an additional week to prepare their papers.) Debaters should cover the controversy as well as the status of government policy on the issue.

Debaters on each side should consult with each other to divide up the topic and to be sure that they are covering the issue completely. However, each debater should work independently on the paper.

Students not participating as the debaters for a particular topic are required to come to class with a written list of at least four questions (two for each side in the debate), including issues for discussion, position statements, charges, etc. to be presented to the debaters during the discussion period of the debate. These questions may be drawn from the text or from other sources. Students will turn in their list of questions at the end of each debate.

The debate format is as follows:

Total time for the debate is approximately 65 minutes

Pro side begins and presents its position in 15 minutes
Con side presents its position in 15 minutes
Pro side rebuts the con side in 7 minutes
Con side rebuts the pro side in 7 minutes
Class asks questions, takes positions, makes charges, etc. in 20 minutes

Frequently, students believe that 15 minutes is insufficient for making their points, and they have a tendency to rush and get finished in 10 minutes or less. It is a good idea to practice and time your presentation. Generally, 15 minutes is sufficient to present your position.

III. Discussion Leadership

Each student will be assigned to lead the weekly discussion of the assigned reading for one topic (two students per topic). There are 20 students for 12 topics, so volunteers for additional discussion leadership are welcomed.

Discussion leaders should have thoroughly examined the readings for their assigned week, and should: a. organize the readings according to the central themes, research questions or concerns of the authors; b. note the major findings of the research; c. note important questions, issues, or
concerns not covered by the research and how these questions might be answered with additional research.

Discussion leaders should pose general discussion questions for the class and stimulate class discussion. Students should not read a prepared speech to the class, but are to lead the class in their discussion of the topic. Discussion leaders should consult with each other to divide the work and to be sure that they are covering the topic completely.