Darrin Hicks is convinced that there is no better way to become a truly critical thinker than debate. As director of the DU debate team for 18 years, he has helped students employ the fine skills of argumentation and persuasion on the debate floor. He has also seen how those skills prepare students for successful careers after college.

“Our students learn an incredible amount from debating. Besides the vast content knowledge about current affairs, political and moral philosophy and economics they have from debating, they learn how to really think critically,” said Hicks, professor of communication studies. “They learn how to construct logically valid arguments, how to formulate those arguments in vivid and persuasive terms, and how to sift through competing arguments to invent a compelling framework for making decisions.”

This year’s team consists of 40 undergraduate students. “Our debaters do the same kind of reading than a PhD student; they do the same kind of persuasive speaking as a lawyer or politician. This is what makes our debaters so successful after college,” said Hicks, who has taught at DU since 1993.

The team had a successful fall quarter, which included winning the Spanish language division at University of North Georgia, and reaching the quarterfinals at Oxford, one of the biggest debate tournaments in the world. This spring they will compete in several championship tournaments, such as the U.S. National Championships held on the DU campus April 15-17, and the World Spanish-Language Championship held in Guatemala in July.

Hicks’ involvement with the debate team aligns nicely with his own scholarly interests in argumentation, rhetoric and the philosophy of communication. His current research is focused on political argumentation and community collaboration.

“Right now, I am spending most of my time thinking and writing about the nature of political conviction, which I believe is the affective, or emotional, component of argumentation,” said Hicks. “I am very interested in figuring out what sort of affective forces bind people to certain positions and what makes them willing to fight so strenuously, even violently, to defend those positions.”

He also is researching what makes a decision-making process feel fair and just to those using it.

“I have spent a long time thinking and writing about what makes people willing to commit their energy and resources to community projects, even when that means they must set aside their own interests to do so. I believe that one answer lies in the fairness of decision-making processes; when we perceive that a decision-making process is truly fair, we are much more willing to set aside our personal interests for the common good,” he said.

Effective communication, or lack of, can have a fundamental impact on our personal, social and professional lives.

“Communication is an integral part of every human endeavor and understanding how communication works—from how it constitutes the heart all of our relationships to why the design of communicative processes, intentional or not, is what will determine if a group of people
can effectively collaborate to solve the world’s most pressing problems—is a necessary perquisite to being successful in any career path,” said Hicks.