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‘Smart Pills’ for College Students: Would That Be Cheating?

By Nancy Szokan

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Should students be allowed — or encouraged — to take “smart drugs” so they can get better grades?

That will be the question on the table on Monday when the public affairs program Intelligence Squared — IQ² — brings its lively debate format to George Washington University.

Here’s how it works. IQ² presents a motion for debate — in this case, “College students should be allowed to take smart drugs.” The premise is explained: “Off-label use of ‘smart drugs’ — pharmaceuticals meant to treat disorders like ADHD, narcolepsy and Alzheimer’s — are becoming increasingly popular among college students hoping to get ahead by helping them to stay focused and alert for longer periods of time. But is this cheating? Should their use as cognitive enhancers be approved by the FDA, the medical community and society at large? Do the benefits outweigh the risks?”

Arguing for the motion will be Anjan Chatterjee, the chair of neurology at Pennsylvania Hospital, and Nita Farahany, director of the Duke Initiative for Science & Society. Arguing against will be Eric Racine, director of a neuroethics research unit in Montreal, and Nicole Vincent, an associate professor of philosophy, law and neuroscience at Georgia State University.

Before debate begins, the audience votes on whether they agree with the motion. Afterward, the audience votes again — and the side that has swayed more voters wins.

This is one of a series of IQ² debates, most of them held in New York; upcoming motions include “Raise the federal gas tax to fund infrastructure” and “U.S. prosecutors have too much power.” Tickets for the GWU event are \$30, but admission is free to students at any institution and to GWU alumni. A reception begins at 5 p.m., and the debate at 6. Information and ticket sales are at intelligencesquaredus.org.